

PLUCK AND LUCK

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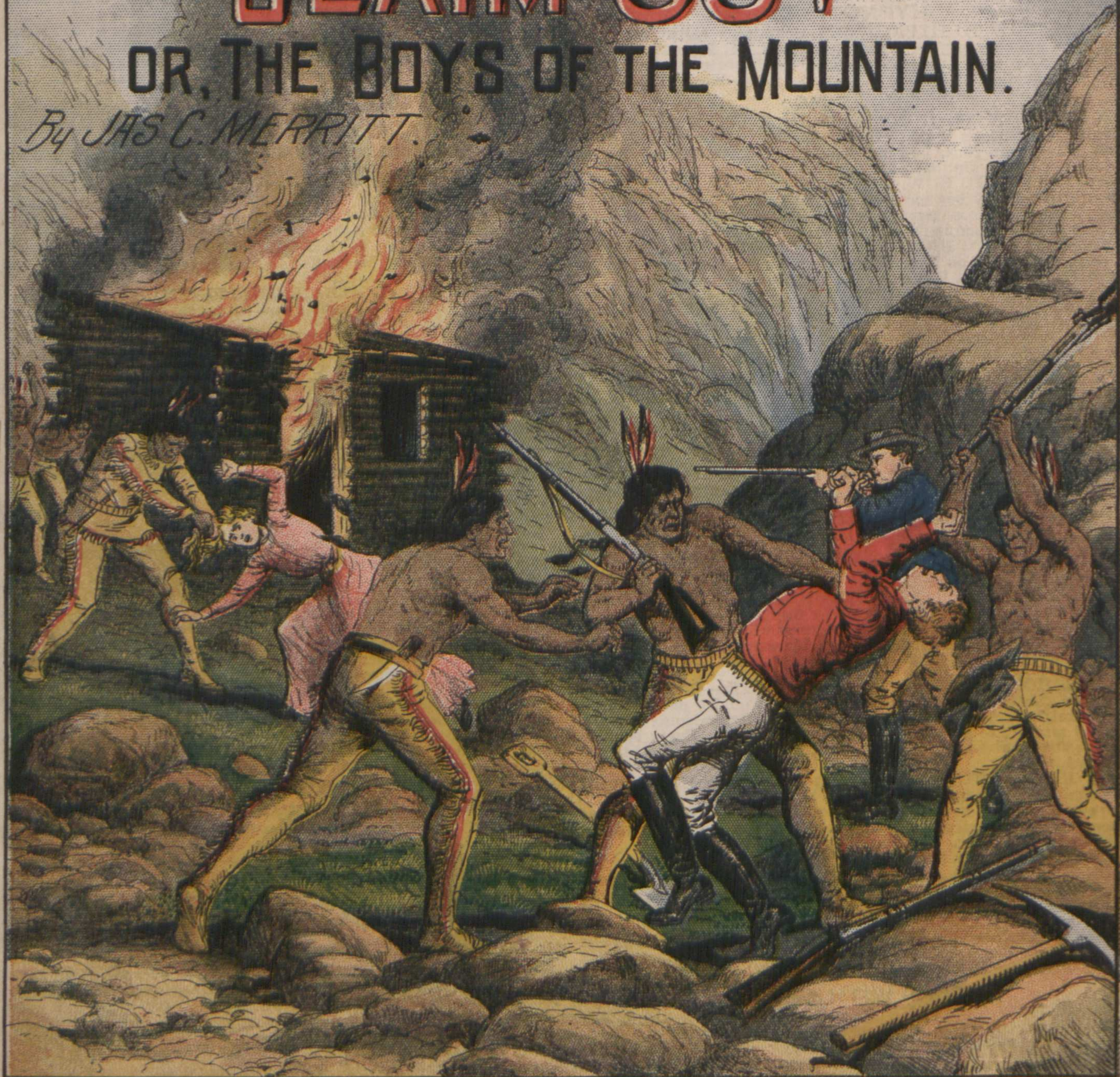
No. 275.

NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 9, 1903.

Price 5 Cents.

CLAIM 33! OR, THE BOYS OF THE MOUNTAIN.

By JAS C. MERRITT.



Flames were bursting from the shanty in front of which he saw Rose struggling in the grasp of a powerful Indian. Reaching his rifle, he ran a few steps up the hill, and leveled his rifle at the Indian.

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(Continued on page 3 of cover.)

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CLAIM 33;

OR,

THE BOYS OF THE MOUNTAIN:

By JAS. C. MERRITT.

CHAPTER I.

FROM DESPAIR TO JOY.

"It's all up with us, Bob."

"Yes," was the doleful answer.

"The last ounce of dust spent, and every foot of ground in which we stick a pick is worthless."

"Don't despair, Phil—let's hope for the best."

"It's no use, Bob Maxwell. We've been now thirteen months in Arizona, and all that time going from bad to worse. Fate's against us, and I can see no way to end our misery, save by ending our existence, and really I don't care how soon that's done."

"Well, Phil, if those Apaches should find us on this mountain they might end our existence a little sooner than we have calculated on."

"I calculate on nothing except starvation. I am so hungry I could eat my boots."

The parties to the above conversation were two young fellows about eighteen or nineteen years of age. They were seated about a small camp fire on the side of the mountain, over which the shades of night are falling.

The story of Bob Maxwell and Phil Shelton was a sad one. They were two young fellows who, for love of adventure and greed of gold, had come to the wilds of Arizona. They left comfortable homes and kind friends and relatives to brave the hardships of a miner's life.

Reaching the wilds of the West, they found every sort of obstacle in their way to fortune. They were called tenderfeet and subjects easily to swindle. The coarse, rough men of the mining villages and camps made them the butt of ridicule. They failed to "strike pay dirt," and day by day grew more seedy and more desperate.

"Bob, I've half a mind sometimes to turn road agent," said Phil, desperately.

"And rob?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Phil, would you be a thief?"

"I would soon be hunted down and hung and that would end my existence, which is about what I want now."

"Oh, shet up, youngster, shet up!" said a voice behind them, and a tall, raw-boned man of fifty, whose face had been bronzed by long exposure, and whose hands were hardened by toil, came up to the two young men seated by the camp fire.

At the first sound of a human voice the young men seized their rifles and cocked them, but recognizing the new-comer, they laid them down.

The old fellow chuckled at the little alarm his sudden appearance had caused, and threw down a pick, shovel and pan.

"Yer talkin' so despairingly that one'd think ye wouldn't keer if a greaser ur redskin would come right up an' cut yer throats an' then as soon as ye hear a voice yer grab yer rifles jist ez though ye war expecting a condemned leetle diffikilty."

"It's force of habit, Joe—all force of habit, that's all," said Phil. "We've not an ounce of dust; twenty miles from Greaser Gulch, an' not a bite to eat, nor have we had a bit of grub to-day."

"Waal, it do look like a little dark jist now, boys," said the individual called Joe, or rather Silver Joe. "My stomach jist now feels ez empty ez my pockets, an' this 'ere fire a snappin' an' a cracklin' here's arful tantalizin'. Makes me think that thar ort t' be b'ar steak a-brilin' on them coals."

The three men sat down around the fire and gazed hungrily into it. Many times had old Silver Joe been hungry before, and it did not go so hard with him as with the boys.

It was but twenty miles to the mining town of Greasers Gulch; the distance, however, was too great for the tired, hungry men to think of tramping it that night, and, besides, not having any money to buy food with, they would stand as good a show of starving in the valley as along the mountain side.

Old Silver Joe had filled and lighted his pipe, and sat gazing into the fire on which his despairing companions were also looking.

Suddenly a rustle in the bushes startles the old miner, and laying his hand on his rifle, he turned his head in the direction whence the sound came, to see a pair of blazing eyes glaring at them from the darkness.

"Thar's meat, boys," he whispered, and silently he raised his rifle to his face, took a quick aim, and pulled the trigger.

A sound half way between an angry growl and broken roar followed the sharp report of the rifle, and a monster beast of some kind could be heard running crashing through the woods.

"What is it—what is it?" cried both the boys, seizing their rifles at their side and leaping to their feet.

"It's a b'ar—a b'ar. Look out!"

But if old Joe expected the wounded beast to come out openly and attack them he was mistaken. Instead, bruin turned tail to the camp and ran.

"Too consarned bad, ain't it, boys?" cried the old man. "Thar's meat, my lads, an' less hev it. I've winged the game, an' we'll foller him."

The continued growling and spasmodic plunging of the wild beast was proof positive that he was badly hit, and the old miner and his young companions took hope as they pursued him through the darkness.

Silver Joe had seized a burning pine knot, which he carried above his head as a torch, holding his rifle in his right hand.

"Foller clus, boys, an' keep yer eyes peeled fur the varmint. He's bad hit an' we'll sleep with full stomachs yet."

The trail of the wounded bear was not easy to follow even by daylight, and at night nothing but the desperation of three starving men could have carried them over it. Through thickets of mountain oak, along ledges and down slopes they pursued the wounded beast, sometimes almost on him and sometimes losing sight and sound of him altogether for two hours. Then they found themselves on a great tableland on the side of the mountain, while the wounded bear had disappeared altogether. No sight or sound of it could they discover.

"It's too bad, boys—guess I'll hev to take it back an' go to sleep empty arter all."

At this moment they heard a heavy groan not a dozen paces away. The three men gave utterance to short exclamations of joy, and with torch held high above them they advanced, parting the thick bushes with their hands.

Ten paces through the thicket and they came upon a sight that was calculated to fill a hungry hunter with joy. There lying on the ground was a large, fat bear in the last throes of death. The bullet of the old hunter had reached a vital spot after all, and the bear was almost dead.

To cut its throat and end its struggles was but the work of a moment, and while Bob Maxwell built a fire of dry sticks, of which he found an abundance, Silver Joe and Phil Shelton removed the skin and cut large broiling steaks from the dead bear.

In a few moments the savory odor of the cooking bear's meat filled the air.

"Do you know where we are, Joe?" Bob asked.

"No; I never war in this part o' the mountain, but I've been about it for ten years."

"Have you never prospected here?"

"No. Nobody ever had a claim here in this part except an old feller—that half the people thought crazy, an' the other half a road agent. They said he had a claim which he called 'Claim Thirty-three,' but no one ever thought he found pay dirt on it."

The meal was almost finished when there came on the night air a piercing shriek. The miners started up and stared at each other in amazement.

"What is that?" was on the lips of every man at once.

"It's a woman's voice," said Bob.

"Yer right, Bob; ef that warn't a gal what uttered that 'ar screech, then ye kin say old Silver Joe don't know a nugget from a nigger head!"

Bob Maxwell's rifle was in his hand, and his breath came quick. Both he and Phil were brave, honest young fellows, who were always ready to aid the weak and oppressed. They could hardly believe their own ears.

"No women live on this mountain, do they, Joe?" Bob asked.

"Never hearn tell on any."

"Help, help, help!" came a shriek from the same direction they had first heard the sound.

"It's a woman or girl in trouble," cried Bob, and, snatching a burning brand from the camp-fire, he ran as fast as he could through the scrub oak, stumbling over stones and getting more than one tumble.

At last he came upon a scene which was enough to fill the breast of any brave man with indignation.

Two villainous looking ruffians, each holding the hand of a girl, who was not to exceed fifteen years of age, were not over twenty paces away. They were dragging her along the path down the mountain side, and the girl was struggling with might and main to break away.

"Let me go! oh, let me go!"

"Not much, beauty, not much, till ye tell us whar it is," cried one of them.

"Oh, help! Will no one help me?"

"Not much, gal. Thar's no un who knows anything about this part o' the world except us. We've determined to find out whar yer old father's got that Claim Thirty-three staked off. Nobody'll ever hear ye, so ye kin yelp——"

Bob waited to hear no more. He knew that the girl was in the hands of a pair of ruffians who, perhaps, intended to kill her. Quick as thought his rifle came to his shoulder. One of the ruffians had a pine torch in his hand, which lighted up the forest for several rods about them.

The young miner was not a bad marksman, and at the first shot the man holding the torch fell, dropping the torch on the ground.

Like an avenger Bob bounded through the thicket and leaped at the other villain, who released the girl and ran for life.

"Thank you, sir! oh, thank you! They have killed my father, and were going to kill me, when you came and saved my life."

"Where do you live?"

"But a few rods around the spur of the mountain," she answered.

"I thought this part of the mountain uninhabited."

"We have lived here for four years."

"Who?"

"Father and I."

"And you say they killed him."

"Oh, I fear so. He is at our cabin, and I know he is dead."

"Take me to him at once," said Bob. He did not think of waiting until his companions, who were following after him, had come up, but accompanied the girl to the shanty, which was so snugly hidden behind some rocks and shrubs that one might have searched months for it without finding it.

A man about forty-five years of age lay upon the floor of the shanty. He had been wounded by three stabs in the body and was just recovering from a fainting fit, caused by loss of blood.

"Oh, he has killed me, he has done his work at last; after years trying to kill me, he has done it."

"Who was he?" Bob asked.

"Who are you?" the wounded man asked faintly, opening his eyes and gazing in astonishment at the young miner.

"Father, he saved me! They were dragging me away to kill me because I would not tell them where Claim Thirty-three was. He shot him."

The wounded man gazed at Bob for a moment and then said:

"You look to be honest, and I have a notion to trust you. Are you a miner?"

"I am."

"Would you like to know where the richest claim in Arizona

can be found, and where not only ounces, but pounds of gold may be dug?"

"I would."

The wounded man was very weak and spoke with much difficulty as he resumed:

"I want to exact from you one promise, and that is that my child," and he laid his hand on his daughter Rose's head, "shall have all the gold in the cache, and one-half of all that's taken out of Claim Thirty-three. Will you promise that?"

"I will."

"I believe you. She will give you the map of the mine, and you can easily find it." Then he fell into a momentary fit of unconsciousness. Bob examined his wounds and dressed them to the very best of his ability. The man revived, and asked:

"Did you kill him?"

"Who?"

"Moses Evans. He who stabbed me."

"I do not know. I shot a man, and he fell, but I did not know him."

"Go see if he has a scar on his cheek."

Bob went out with a torch down the path to the spot where he had made the attack, but the fallen man could not be seen.

CHAPTER II.

TELL OR DIE!

Bob Maxwell was completely amazed. He was sure the man whom he had shot had been seriously wounded, and an examination of the ground where he had fallen showed a small pool of blood. Whether the man had gone off alone or been carried away he could not tell.

By the aid of his torch he was still examining the ground, trying to get upon the right trail, when he heard the tramp of feet in the thicket and the glimmer of another torch.

Extinguishing his own light, he kneeled behind a large stone and cocked his gun, ready to meet friend or foe.

"Be keerful, Phil, ur we'll find ourselves in a condemned leetle diffikilty afore we knows it," a familiar voice was heard whispering, and the next moment the youthful miner saw his two companions step out from the thicket within ten paces of where he was concealed. Old Silver Joe continued: "I don't see whar'n thunder that 'ar young feller run to. Can't find hide nor h'ar o' him!"

"Yes, you can. I am here!" and Bob sprang from his ambush.

"What! Great grubs! what yer been doin'? Heerd ye shoot—or somebody shoot, an' s'posed ye'd been done up by some tarnil redskin ur Greaser."

Bob told the story of his adventures in as few words as possible, and his companions listened in open-mouthed wonder.

"What! do yer say the old feller has a rich mine?" gasped Joe.

"Yes—it's worth millions."

"Good luck—good luck!" cried Phil.

"An' they did him up?"

"Yes."

"What fur?"

"I don't know it all. There's an old story to it which he didn't tell; but there is a man, Moses Evans——"

"I know him," interrupted Joe. "Moonshine Mose," an' the wust villain that ever went unhung."

"He has some grudge against this man. I—I don't believe he told me his name."

"Waal, then, ye'd better find out. Let's go to him at onct; he may live arter all."

"Joe's suggestion was thought to be a good one, and the three mountaineers set out for the cabin."

They had almost reached it when a piercing scream rose on the air.

"Nuther diffikilty!" cried Silver Joe, and like racers the three men bounded toward the cabin.

"Here they come—cut and run!" cried a voice at the cabin.

"Moonshine Mose!" cried Joe, discharging his rifle at the villain just as he disappeared around the cabin.

The girl had been seized by two or three of the ruffians, but the Boys of the Mountain were so close on them that they were compelled to release her and fly for their lives.

Moonshine Mose drew a revolver and emptied all six of the chambers at our three miners as they charged on the hut, but his aim was too hasty to be accurate.

Foiled a second time in their attempt to force the secret from the girl, the villains beat a hasty retreat.

"Thank you, sir!" cried the girl, as Bob entered the house.

"You have saved my life a second time to-night."

"Were those the same men?"

"Yes, sir, only there were two more, whom I had never seen before."

"These are my companions, honest miners, miss. I beg pardon, what's your name?"

"Rose," she answered.

"Rose who?"

"Rose Thorne."

"This is Silver Joe, Miss Rose, a brave man and veteran miner, and this is my college chum, Phil Shelton; now that we all know each other, how is your father—still alive?"

"Yes, sir—he is still alive and that is about all," Rose sobbed. "He can't live long."

They entered the hut to find the hermit miser too weak to talk, and much as Bob would have liked to have asked him some questions concerning the feud between him and Moonshine Mose, he dared not. Old Silver Joe was a practical surgeon, and set to work at once to dress and poultice the wounds.

"Do you think he will live?" Bob asked.

"He may pull through, but it'll be a close rub," was the answer.

The wounded man was too weak to talk, and Bob went to the girl who, regarding herself already an orphan, sat sobbing in one corner of the cabin.

"I want to ask you some questions," he said, sitting by her side. "Will you answer them?"

"Yes, sir, if I can."

"You have been here four years, you say. From what State did you come?"

"Ohio—Chillicothe, Ohio."

"Did your father know this man Moses Evans before he came here?"

"Yes, sir. He was at our house the year before we came—the year that mother died."

"How long has your father known him?"

"I don't know, but think he has known him a great many years."

"Was his hatred of your father on account of Claim Thirty-three——"

"No, it dates way back before I was born. I don't know it all, sir. It's a mystery to me—father never would tell me—but they have been bitter enemies for years."

"How did your father find Claim Thirty-three? Was he a prospector?"

"No, sir. My father was train dispatcher at Chillicothe. One day he went down to Parkersburg, and on the way back there was a terrible wreck, and a man from the West named Otto Barnes was fatally injured. Father brought him to our house, and we cared for him. At his death he, having no rela-

tives, told us of this mine, Claim Thirty-three, which he had discovered, and willed it to us, giving us the map and plot. We came on at once to Arizona, and proceeded to work it. Father determined to live a hermit life, and I have never been seen by anyone until last week——"

"Well, but Moonshine Mose, or Moses Evans?" interrupted Bob.

"I was going to tell you of him. By accident he found his way through the secret pass, and came on father and I in the woods. We did not see him, it seems, and he told us to-night that he shadowed us to the shanty, where he heard us talking of the richness of Claim Thirty-three, and saw father looking over some of the bags of gold dust and nuggets. He then went to Greaser Gulch and, securing the services of some of his myrmidons, came tonight to force us to tell him where the mine was, and of the place where we had buried our gold. There was a fight and he stabbed father, and was dragging me away to hang me, because I would not tell where the mine was, when you came up—and you know the rest."

Bob was very much interested in the girl's story. She really knew but little of Moonshine Mose, for her father had kept the mystery which surrounded the villain and himself a profound secret.

"I will find out something of that villain yet," he said to himself, and went to Joe and asked: "Joe, how long have you known Moonshine Mose?"

"Dun know, youngster, but it's been a good many years—some eight ur ten more ur less, off an' on."

"Is he in the West all the time?"

"Dun know. Sometimes he's here awhile, and then he's gone awhile—dun know whar. His principal business is gamblin', an' some say stealin'. He's a bad feller, an' is in more condemned leetle diffikilties 'an a honest man orter be."

"There is some deep mystery about him, and Mr. Thorne, this miner——"

At this moment they were interrupted by the entrance of Phil, who had been on guard just outside the door. Phil said:

"There is someone skulking about in the woods not far away, and I think it would be a good idea to keep your hands on your guns."

It was evident that Moonshine Mose and his desperadoes had not given up the fight yet. But they had quite enough of the Boys of the Mountain, and, finding them on guard, did not venture another attack that night.

Next day Phil was left at the cabin on guard, and Silver Joe, Bob and the girl as guide, set out to find "Claim Number Thirty-three."

She produced the maps and set out to guide them through the mazes of a labyrinth which seemed impossible for one to traverse. But the girl led them to the claim, and Bob at once set to work.

Almost the first stroke of his pick brought up a nugget of marvelous size.

"Look, Joe, look—it's a bonanza," shouted the delighted Bob, holding aloft the nugget.

"Waal, now ain't that a beauty!" cried the old miner. "Why, they're as thick in this claim as 'taters in a hill."

They worked the claim on the sly, taking great care that they were not watched by Moonshine Mose or any of his gang, for they knew they were still in the neighborhood. The wounded man was thought to be slowly recovering, though he was still very weak, and there was danger of a relapse at any time. A guard was kept at the cabin all the time.

One evening as Bob was returning alone from the hidden claim, a rope was suddenly thrown over his head, and before he could draw either a knife or pistol his arms were pinioned to his side.

"Now we've got yer," said Moonshine Mose, as followed by

four villainous-looking wretches he emerged from the woods. "Mexican George is right handy with a rope."

"What does this mean?" the youth asked indignantly.

"Oh, don't get in a tantrum, but take it easy, will you? We don't intend to hang or drown you unless you compel us to. All we want is some information in regard to Claim Thirty-three."

The brave youth was silent and defiant. He realized his fate almost as soon as captured, and determined to meet it like a man of courage. After waiting a few moments for Bob to say something, Moonshine Mose said:

"We want you to tell us, or rather guide us to Claim Thirty-three."

"I will not," was the brave answer.

"Look out! Beware!"

"Won't you tell?"

"No."

"Bring him along, boys."

He was half carried and half dragged about fifty paces into the dark, deep wood, and there they came to a halt under a large old oak.

A rope was fastened about the neck of the prisoner and the other end thrown over a limb of the tree. Moonshine Mose now came before the youth, and in a voice the meaning of which could not be misconstrued, said:

"Youngster, you know where Claim Thirty-three is located, and can give us directions so we can find it. Now, you can have your choice—tell or die."

CHAPTER III.

WORKING CLAIM THIRTY-THREE—A NEW ENEMY.

For a few moments Bob was silent. It required no little effort on his part to steel his nerves to meet certain death. He thought of the great wealth in the claim, his friends, the wounded man at the cabin and his beautiful daughter, who would be made penniless by the disclosure, and bravely said:

"I will not tell. If it is your intention to hang me, you had as well do so, and be done with it."

"Pull away, boys—we'll elongate his jugular," cried Moonshine Mose, white with fury at being foiled.

At this moment the bushes parted, and a girl of fifteen summers, clad in the wild woodland garb of the mountains, suddenly burst upon the scene. It was Rose.

"Hold, villains!" she cried.

Her long dark hair was streaming in the night wind and her eyes flashing with fire.

"Rose Thorne!" gasped Moonshine Mose, as the rays of light from the burning pine knot fell upon the excited face of the girl.

"Villains, release him."

"Girl, we came near hanging you for not telling, but you got away. Now clear out o' these diggin's, for we've got a little job here that's unpleasant," said Mose.

"I won't go. You shan't hang Bob. He saved my life and you shan't hang him." The brave girl sprang to his side and by a quick, dexterous jerk, tore the noose from his neck.

"That is carrying it too far," yelled Mose, seizing the brave girl and dragging her away.

"Let me go," she said.

"Leave here."

"I won't."

"Swing him up, boys, and she shall tell us or suffer the same fate," thundered Moses Evans, who found his strength taxed to its utmost to hold the active, strong mountain girl.

The noose was again adjusted about the neck of the prisoner.

"Heave away!"

Bang, bang, came a pair of shots from the wood, and one of the men holding the rope fell dead to the earth, and another ran away yelling with rage and pain, a bullet in his shoulder.

"Hold up thar, ye tarnil varmints, 'till I percipitate myself into a condemned leetle diffikilty."

Silver Joe and Phil Shelton burst on the scene. The man holding the torch dropped it, enveloping all in total darkness, and Moonshine Mose released the girl and ran with the others for dear life.

"Waal, Bob, yer had a clus shave, an' no mistake; but I rubbed out one o' them fellers, an' I guess Phil giv anuther a lame shoulder."

"Who was it, Bob?" Phil asked. "Those same villains?"

"Yes, sir," Rose answered. "It was Moonshine Mose and his pals."

"I knowed it," said Silver Joe. "That ar' Moonshine Mose is a snake in the grass, an' he'll stretch hemp some o' these days."

Bob was still trembling at his narrow escape from certain death.

"Father's alone," Rose said in some alarm. "They may come and kill him. Oh, let us hasten to the cabin where we can defend him. I left him but a moment to see if Bob was coming, and saw the light of Moonshine Mose and came up just as they were going to hang Bob."

On reaching the cabin they found the wounded man sleeping quietly. Evidently Mose and his cut-throats had not been near him.

"I tell ye, boys, we jist got to turn out in the mornin' an' hunt down them fellers like they war wolves," said Silver Joe. "We'll either extarminate 'em ur drive 'em from the mountings."

The others acquiesced in Joe's plan and, accordingly, next morning Phil and Joe, armed with Winchesters and revolvers, set out on a man hunt, leaving Bob as a guard at the cabin. They struck the trail of the outlaws about noon, and to their alarm, found it leading directly to the calim.

"Phil, they've found it," said Joe.

He was correct, for when they came upon Claim Thirty-three they saw five men engaged with picks, shovels and pans.

The miners gritted their teeth in rage, and notwithstanding they were five to two, they opened fire on them. At the first round one of the outlaws fell dead, and the remaining four retreated.

"Foller 'em up—foller 'em up!" yelled old Silver Joe. "Not one on 'em shall git away alive!"

Like bloodhounds they pursued them and brought down another. Moonshine Mose was himself wounded, but with his two companions managed to get away.

"I tell ye what it is, boys," said the veteran miner, when they were all assembled in the cabin, "we've got ter take the wounded man an' gal to the mine, an' fix up some kind uv shelter thar. It won't do to leave it an inch any more. Some un 'll come an' jump the claim."

The suggestion of Silver Joe was regarded as an excellent one, and a litter was prepared for the wounded man. All the household effects were conveyed to the camp, where a shanty was hastily built, and the wounded man put into it.

The provisions and household effects of Mr. Thorne were all transferred to the new cabin, and Rose installed as house-keeper.

Silver Joe and the boys worked from early morning until late at night. They were rewarded by pounds of gold in nuggets and dust. Sometimes they had thoughts of quitting "Old Baldy," as the mountain was called, for they must by this time be millionaires, but the greed of gold caused them

to continue. Claim Thirty-three seemed inexhaustible, and day by day the yellow treasures grew greater.

They had already buried several pounds of gold and nuggets and each day added more to the cache. Nothing more had been seen of Moonshine Mose, though they knew that they were in constant danger of another visit from him. Perhaps he was waiting for his wound to heal and would then bring with him a sufficient force to overwhelm them.

"We'll make hay while the sun shines," said old Joe, "and when we git all the gold we can carry make tracks fur the states an' live at ease."

"I was thinking, Joe, we had better not delay another day," said Bob. "After giving Rose one-half, accordin' to promise, we must have a million dollars each. We've got more gold now than we can carry, and I believe you had better start tomorrow morning for the Gulch and get pack mules for us."

"Will Mr. Thorne be able to go?" Joe asked.

"He says so. It's his advice. He will then sell the claim to us or anybody else and divide with us."

"That's a good idee, boy, fur I saw smoke on t'other side of the mountain today, an' I kinder half believe it's the pesky Apaches. If they should take it inter their heads to come here we'd hev one o' the wust little diffikilties wot we've ever hearn tell on."

Next morning Joe made preparations for his journey, and Bob and Phil went to the mine a few rods from the gulch.

Mr. Thorne was able to sit in the door of the cabin and watch the boys at work, and Rose was usually at his side when not engaged in household duties. Old Joe had shouldered his gun and left the cabin with a cheerful smile on his face, but as he approached the boys who were at work he suddenly grew grave.

"Boys," he said in an undertone, "I don't want to skeer anybody, but them cussed Apaches ar' on the mounting. Keep yer eyes peeled an' don't make no fires till I come back. Ez I war out watchin' fur a deer this mornin' at daylight, I found a broken arrer. That means suthin'. I'm goin' now, but I'll be back ez soon ez I kin."

The old man then took his departure, and the boys grew uneasy. They brought their rifles and laid them at their sides to always have them handy.

"Bob, we're going to have trouble. We'll lose every ounce of dust we've got."

"Don't look on the dark side, Phil."

"It's fate—fate is against us," said Phil.

Bob always took a more cheerful view of things than his friend.

"I wish Joe had stayed; we'll need his rifle," said Phil.

"Let up hope he will get back before the Apaches find us," Bob answered.

"At noon Rose took Bob aside, so that her wounded father might not be alarmed at her questions, and asked:

"Are we in danger?"

"I don't want to frighten you, Rose, but I believe we are."

"I know it. When I was on the oluff above us this forenoon I heard the whoop of an Indian not over two miles away."

"It may have been further. The wind is from that part of the mountain, and sounds are carried a long distance. But keep a sharp lookout."

The boys went back to their digging, though a vague feeling of uneasiness seemed to possess them.

Never did the mine yield so much of the yellow treasure before. It seemed to be in every shovelful—in nuggets and dust. The boys of the mountain little dreamed what was in store for them.

A shriek of warning suddenly comes from the cabin.

Whiz! comes an arrow, and after piercing the brim of Bob's hat, sticks in the ground.

"Redskins!" shouts Phil, and, dropping pick and shovel, seizes his rifle.

A tremendous yell rose on the air, and a shower of arrows and bullets fall like rain about him. Bob caught a glimpse of a dark face behind a stone, and sent a bullet between its eyes.

Phil's Winchester was speaking in death-ringing notes.

Bob turned his eyes toward the cabin, and a sight met his gaze which almost froze the blood in his veins. The flames were bursting from the shanty, in front of which he saw Rose struggling in the grasp of a powerful Indian.

Reaching his rifle, he ran a few steps up the hill, and leveled his rifle at the Indian just as he, winding the long hair of the girl about his fingers, raised his knife to stab her.

But ere the youthful miner could pull the trigger he was seized by three or four screeching demons, disarmed, and hurled to the ground with such force as to deprive him of his senses.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE CAVERN.

Phil Shelton was fighting like a hero for his own life and the lives of his friends, but he was only one against fifty. The sharp crack, crack, cracking of his rifle was music which the Apaches did not like to face.

He saw his companion seized and hurled to the ground just as he was about to slay the savage who had held the girl.

Bang! went a gun from the burning cabin, and the Indian who was in the act of slaying Rose fell, shot dead by her wounded father, who had snatched his rifle and sent a bullet through his brain.

"Look thar, hold on, will yer, till I percipitate myself into this ere condemned leetle diffikilty!" roared a voice which could be distinctly heard above the confusion and roar of conflict.

It was Silver Joe who, having come across the Apaches' trail leading toward the claim, had followed it, and come up just at the moment when our friends seemed almost overpowered.

Old Joe was a host in himself.

The Apaches seeing the fall of Bob and capture of the girl, supposed victory sure, and had sprung from cover, rushing in a mass toward the burning cabin.

Joe's rifle rang out again and again, as rapidly as he could pull trigger and lever, and he poured a shower of leaden hail among the redskins, who, with yells of fear, beat a retreat.

"Clar out—git, ye onery mahogany-skinned varmints, ur ye'll be pulverized ez fine ez if ye'd been run through a quartz mill. Look out—crimany—ginger—here we comes a boomin'—scat!"

The eccentricity of Joe, added to his courage, made him dreaded by the Apaches, and, discovering that they had an old and powerful enemy to contend with, they beat a hasty retreat to cover of trees and stones, keeping a respectable distance from those repeating rifles.

"Father—save him!" cried Rose Thorne, pointing to the cabin which was enveloped in flames.

The wounded man's strength had been exhausted by the effort in firing the rifle, and having shot the would-be slayer of his daughter, he sank back upon the flood exhausted and helpless, the blood flowing afresh from those unhealed wounds.

Loud roared those scorching flames about the cabin, almost enwrapping it, and the wounded man was almost suffocated.

Bob had regained his feet and partially recovered from the stunning effect of the fall, when the brave girl uttered the cry. He sprang to the cabin and seized the helpless man in his arms.

But Bob was still weak, and we doubt if he could have succeeded unaided in carrying the wounded man away.

Silver Joe saw his condition, and sprang to his assistance.

"Snakes 'n cattermounts, boy, yer mustn't ixpect to do it all alone," shouted Joe, as he bore the wounded man in his own strong arms from the burning shanty.

"Save it—save it!" gasped the wounded man.

"What?" asked Bob.

"The box," pointing toward the blazing hut. "It is worth more than gold."

"Where is it?" asked Bob.

"In the big wooden chest. Look under the second lid."

Without waiting to hear more, Bob sprang toward the hut, plunged into it, although the smoke was stifling and the heat blistering. Seizing one end of the chest, he dragged it toward the door. Bob had placed the chest there, and he knew where to find it, so it required but little groping about until he got hold of it.

The fire was already falling in showers upon him, and his clothing was almost in a blaze, when he got it to the door.

"Here, Bob, let me help you!" cried Phil, seizing the heavy chest, and by a tremendous jerk bringing it out just as the roof fell in.

The chest was very heavy, and under ordinary circumstances would have taxed the strength of both the youthful miners, but under the excitement Phil handled it as if it had been a paper box.

"Look out for the redskins," roared Silver Joe. "They hain't giv up by a blamed sight."

Joe was right.

"Our friends had only time to drag the chest away from the fire when the Indians, discovering that there were only three of the white men, returned to the fight again.

"Wake, snakes, an' crawl! Gle-ory, boys, jist look out, here they come!" roared the old man, sending three straight shots at the foremost Indians.

But the Apaches kept well behind cover of rocks and stunted bushes, taking advantage of every available place of concealment, and keeping up a steady fire.

There was a ravine but a few rods from the shanty, and into this the wounded man was carried and the wooden chest dragged.

Rose Thorne had had the forethought to snatch her father's gun and ammunition from the burning shanty.

"What are you going to do with it?" Bob asked.

"I am going to help in the defense," she answered.

"Nonsense! Go down in the ravine where you will be out of danger."

"Suppose one should tell you to go——"

"I am a man," the youth answered. "It is my duty to defend——"

"And I am a woman," the girl answered, "and I shall prove to you that I know how to help brave men defend me."

The savages were growing bolder, and Silver Joe's rifle was not alone sufficient to keep them back.

Then Bob saw a powerful Apache trying to make it on a log which had fallen across the chasm. Old Joe had been able to keep them back from the log until now, but his gun was empty, and the Indian was too far away to hit with a pistol.

"Bob, shoot that 'ar redskin!" cried Silver Joe.

"Which one?" asked Bob, for he saw a score in rifle range.

"The one on the log up the gulch. Don't yer let him git over on t'other side ur he'll flank us and shoot us one by one."

Bob saw the wisdom of guarding that log, and brought his rifle to his shoulder, but only a dull snap responded to his pull on the trigger.

"Great heavens, my gun is empty," he cried. "I have not a single charge in the magazine."

"Then, by hokey, we're dun fur," said old Joe, dolefully. "He'll be across afore I kin git loaded."

Crack!

Sharp and keen rang out the report of a rifle a little below the ledge on which Joe and Bob were standing, and the Indian who was crossing the log threw up his hands and plunged headlong into the chasm.

"Now, Mr. Bob, never say again that a girl is not able to take part in her own defense," said a silvery voice, and looking down he beheld Rose Thorne holding a smoking rifle in her hand.

"Bully for the gal!" roared old Silver Joe. "She done him up fust shot."

"Rose, Rose, you have saved our lives!" cried Bob. "Had that savage succeeded in getting across the ravine he would no doubt have hid behind the rocks on the other side and picked us off one by one."

"Can a girl be of any service in a fight?" asked Rose, with a smile on her pale face.

"You are an exception, Rose," he answered.

"I am glad I am," she answered.

The Apaches evidently regarded the log across the ravine as a strategic point, and determined to possess it. They continued to make effort after effort to cross, but the rifles of the three miners guarded the pass closely, and more than one got a mortal hurt in his endeavors to cross the log.

"Boys, we kin keep 'em away from it as long as it's daylight," said the old miner, "but as soon as it's dark they'll be a-slippin' over it. We orter git rid o' that log."

"It can be done," said Bob.

"How?" asked both Joe and Phil.

"Blow it up with powder."

"I don't see how you are going about that," said Phil, who, notwithstanding he was brave as a lion, was inclined to be both incredulous and despondent.

"Very easily, Phil. Take a blast of powder up under the bluff on this side of the ravine, and push it as far under the end of the log between it and the stone on which it rests as you can, place a fuse to it and run for your life."

"The boy's right," said Silver Joe, whose experience in mining told him the log could be blown off the bluff. "It'll work like a top."

"It'll be dangerous to lay that train. Who'll do it?" said Phil.

"I will," said Bob.

"No, I'll do it myself," said Phil.

"Hold on, Phil, it's my plan, and I'm going to try it."

The honor of planting the blast was given to Bob, and he put a double charge in a tin can with a fuse attached to the lower end of it.

It had grown dusk when he started along the ravine, creeping under the rocks, for it was certain death to show his head above them. Cunning, desperate savages were so near that he could hear their guttural exclamations as they crouched behind their covers with deadly guns and bows in their hands.

Nearer and nearer he approaches to the log until he is almost at it, when he sees another savage making the venture. Bob knows that keen eyes are watching that log, and the ring of a rifle, followed by a yell of pain, as the wounded redskin retreats, were not unexpected.

At last he has gained the log and is directly under it. He crawls up the stony embankment until he is almost where the end of the log rests on the bluff on the side of the ravine next the savages. The Apaches are not ten paces away, and he has now to use the utmost caution, for the crumbling and dropping of a stone large as a bean might betray him.

Reaching his hand upward, he pushes the charge between the log and sloping rock on which it rests. With all his

strength he drives it in as far as it can go, and then trails out a good yard of fuse.

There is no time to spare, for the Indians, growing bolder in the darkness, were preparing to make a sortie and cross the log.

Lighting the fuse, the youthful miner hurried away up the ledge. His foot struck a bit of loose stone, which fell with a plunge down into the ravine below.

With a yell the Apaches rushed down to the ravine. His friends saw his danger and began firing at the Indians. It took close shooting, for he was on the ledge within four feet of the top, and their bullets whizzed above his head.

Half a dozen furious painted demons rushed on the log to cross over during the temporary excitement.

Some were on the log, some getting on, and others standing by, when suddenly there came a tremendous blaze, a dull report and that end of the log was blown high into the air, carrying three or four with it, and dropping down into the ravine, thus cutting off all chance of crossing the chasm.

Bob reached his friends with a bullet hole through the crown of his hat, and an arrow sticking in the collar of his coat.

"Done it; by crimany gracious, Bob, yer a brave one!" cried old Silver Joe, seizing the young fellow's hand, and shaking it warmly.

"Come with me. I've found a place where we will be safe," said Rose Thorne, who had been down the ravine.

"What is it?" Bob asked.

"A cave."

"A cave, gal, whar?"

"Right down the ravine, not a hundred yards away."

The miners could hardly believe it. They had been along that ravine half a hundred times, and thought all the country had been carefully explored, but had seen nothing of a cavern.

But Rose had found it, and with the wounded man, the chest, their arms, and what few effects they had been able to take from the burning shanty, they were soon ensconced in the cavern. Plutonian darkness greeted them, and the height and depth could only be surmised.

"We must hev a light, boys," said old Silver Joe.

"There are some pine knots at the mouth of the cavern," said Bob. "I will light one."

Little did he dream of the rich wonders which a lighted torch would reveal.

CHAPTER V.

MOONSHINE MOSE AND THE APACHES.

"Hurry up with the torch," cried Phil, who had become impatient.

"It's no easy matter to light a pine knot, Phil," said Bob, who had already wasted two or three matches.

"This 'ere may be a b'ars den," Silver Joe whispered to Phil. "You'd better keep yer rifle ready."

The girl was sitting by the side of her wounded father, who had been placed near the entrance to the cavern, and Silver Joe and Phil were just beyond them.

"It may be an Apaches' den," Phil answered.

"No; if they'd a-knowed o' this place they'd a-been here long before and attacked us in the r'ar," answered Joe.

"Haven't you got it lighted, Bob?" the impatient Phil asked.

"Yes, I believe it will go this time."

"Bring it in and let us see what kind of a place this is, anyway."

Bob had at last succeeded in lighting the pine torch and entered the cavern.

Well might the scene which that lighted torch revealed produce a shout of wonder and delight. The cavern was vast, and the burning torch failed to reveal the farther end of it.

But ten thousand hues were flashed and reflected from the blazing torch. The walls, the ceiling and ground were studded with precious metals—gold and silver.

"Great grubs!" gasped old Silver Joe. "Ef this don't take the handkerchief off the Christmas tree."

"Did ever mortal eye behold such a sight?" said Bob.

"Oh, if we only had this cave back in the states it would be worth something," said Phil.

Even Rose Thorne forgot her privations and danger, and clapped her hands in joy and enthusiasm.

The wounded man raised himself on his elbow, and gazing about the cabin, said:

"It's a part of Claim Thirty-three. Have you brought the box?"

"The chest is here, father."

"And the box in it?"

"Yes, father."

"Keep it, Rose; take care of it. Don't let it get lost, for the contents of that box are of more value to you than a mountain of gold."

"What is it, father?"

"I cannot tell now. You must not look at it now."

The wounded man was very weak, and lay for hours at a time on the bearskin which had been brought for him, not saying a word, but always keeping his eyes fixed on the great wooden chest.

Night passed in the wonderful cavern, and when morning dawned they found that the entrance to it was hidden by great masses of veil moss, which extended from the top of the bluff down to the bottom. Had a curtain been made on purpose it would not have more effectively concealed the mouth of the cavern.

"Waal, I be hanged if natur ain't done a good deal to hide this 'ere hole in the ground," said the old miner, as he stood at the narrow entrance and gazed out through the fleeces of moss. "How'n the world that gal found it it's a wonder!"

Rose explained that her finding the entrance to the cavern on the day before was an accident.

Nothing had been seen or heard of the Indians that night, nor were they to be seen at daylight."

"We must know whether they have left the mountain side or not," said Bob, "and I propose to go out and reconnoiter."

"You'll get killed if you do," growled Phil. "It's more than a man's life's worth to venture out of this cave. So you stay and let me go."

"I don't see that that would make matters any better, Phil. You would be missed as much as I."

"Oh, I might get through all right."

"I am going to go," said Bob.

"So am I."

"Wall, boys, you needn't be quarrelin' about it," interrupted old Silver Joe. "Ye kin both go, an' I'll stay here an' keep guard."

It was arranged that Bob and Phil should both go.

Armed with Winchesters and revolvers, they crept from the moss-covered entrance to the cave, and went up the ravine in the direction of the deserted mine.

The smoldering ruins of the cabin could be distinctly seen from the edge of the cliff to which they climbed, but no Indian was to be found.

"Bob?"

"Well, Phil."

"Let's go a little farther, where we can have a better look at the claim. They may be on the lower edge of it."

"Oh, nonsense. The Apaches never work a mining claim," said Bob.

"But let us crawl along the ledge to where we blew the log off the bluff."

Though Bob thought it almost a useless undertaking, to gratify Phil he consented. Slowly and carefully they crawled along the ledge, having to keep their backs bent low so that their heads might be seen above the bluff, while every step was taken with care, for a single false step would have precipitated them to the rocks below.

"Halt!"

It was Phil who whispered the command.

Phil was directly in front of Bob, and had taken a peep over the bluff at the mine beyond.

"What do you see, Phil?" Bob asked.

"The Apaches."

"Aha—where?"

He crept forward to his friend's side.

"Right down at the lower end of the mine, Bob. Look out, be very careful, or you will show your head."

The youthful miner crept cautiously up the side of the bluff, and peeped over the rocks at the mine below.

"Yes, there they are, forty at least; all squatted about on the ground as if they were engaged in a consultation," said Bob. "Oh, how I wish we had a Gatling gun to turn loose upon them."

"What a villainous crowd."

"A precious set of cut-throats."

"Equal to Moonshine Mose."

"Look, Phil, who is that coming out of the wood?" Bob gasped. "As I live it's Moonshine Mose himself."

"Yes, it is."

"What is he going to do?"

"Isn't he afraid of them? Won't they kill him?"

"Well, it seems not," said Bob.

Moonshine Mose and three or four of his villainous followers were seen to come down to the group of Indians, and the chief rose and grasped his hand.

"They are friendly, Bob."

"Yes, looks as if they were going to form an alliance."

"Oh, I wish I was near enough to hear what they say."

"I am going to get near enough to hear what they say," said Bob.

"How?"

"I am going further up the ravine and crawl out behind that large stone. The wind blows toward it; and from there we can hear every word that's said."

"Great Jupiter, you'll be scalped. A man who tries that will be committing suicide. You'd better go back to the cave, and let me do it."

"No, I will go and you remain here until I return."

"Let's both go together."

"Well."

This part of the programme agreed upon, the youthful scouts continued along the ledge, which grew narrower and more difficult at every step.

Slowly and cautiously on bended knees, which became bruised and sore through creeping over the stony path, glided the young scouts toward the desired spot below the mine where the savages were grouped.

Bob was before, and found the path more difficult as they advanced. Halting, he whispered:

"Phil."

"Yes, sir."

"We've got to carry our guns in our teeth."

"Why?"

"It will take both hands and feet to make the next twenty rods."

"Carry 'em in our teeth! By Jingo! my mouth's not big enough!"

"Tie a string around the barrel and hold the string in your teeth; but be careful that they are not accidentally discharged.

Bob's plan was adopted.

It was actually necessary, as they learned before they had gone far that it took all their nerve, strength and activity to make it over some of the places. They succeeded, however, and at last reached the point for which they were making.

A huge mass of stone now shielded them from the enemy, and with every nerve strained to its utmost tension, they crawled in the ground until within fifty paces of the group of Indians, who were no doubt in council with the whites.

Here they dropped down behind the huge stone.

"We can hear what's said from this spot," Bob whispered.

"Oh, yes—the wind sets this way."

"Here, Phil, you watch and listen from the left and I from the right side of this stone. If you want me, kick me."

But when the boys came to try the experiment they found that they would each have to have legs twenty feet longer in order to make the desired reach.

Bob contrived an ingenious device to cover this defect.

In order to have the means of signaling each other with kicks, he took a bit of cord which he had and tied it about his left ankle and gave the other end to Phil to tie about his foot.

It was just long enough to enable them to crawl around the great stone far enough to see on both sides of it.

Here the boys lay listening and watching.

Moonshine Mose was addressing the Apaches.

He was saying:

"My red brothers, do you want revenge for the braves who have been killed?"

There was a general grunting of approval.

"You can have it."

"How—how?" asked the chief of the band, who had lost a son in the fight.

"We will aid you in hunting and killing the bad white men."

"Good—good—good!" grunted the redskins, which with most of them doubtless exhausted their vocabulary.

"But there is one thing that I wish to say to my red brothers, one condition of the bargain——"

"What, what?"

"We want this land, this part of the mountain for ourselves after they are dead; all papers and writing, and I want the girl who is with them. She must not be harmed by anyone."

There was a moment's silence, and then the ugly old chief said:

"Why white man want pale face squaw?"

"I want her, and will give you all the guns, ammunition and ornaments. All I want is the girl and a small wooden box."

Bob and Phil stared at the speaker in wonder. The box again. What wonderful mystery did it contain?"

CHAPTER VI.

"DON'T STIR OR YOU ARE A DEAD MAN."

It was evident from the first that the chief of the Apaches did not like the idea of giving up the girl. With a grunt of dissatisfaction he said:

"The pale face squaw live in the wigwam of Big Deer. Make the heart of the big chief glad."

From where he lay Bob could see the face of the villain Moonshine Mose flush and pale by turns. At last having to a certain measure regained his composure, he said:

"It's impossible, chief, it cannot be."

"Ugh, me big Injun—heap much fight!" and the chief started to his feet, his hand on his scalping knife.

"Hold on, Big Deer, don't be making a fool of yourself," cried Mose, master still of the situation. "Listen to reason. You will never find the white men and girl. They have carried away their treasure and rifles, and neither revenge nor plunder will fall to you unless you have our aid. You cannot find them without my help."

The chief seemed disconcerted by this speech for a moment. At last the truth of the situation seemed to dawn upon him, and he said:

"White chief, know where to find 'em?"

"Yes, I do."

"Will you find 'um?"

"Yes," answered the villain, with an assurance that startled the listeners.

"Does he know our hiding-place?" Bob asked himself.

Phil kicked, and the rope jerked Bob's leg. The youthful miner answered the signal by another kick, and the two began crawling to the rear of the great stone.

"Bob!"

"Phil!"

"Did you ever hear of such a villainous proposition in all your life?"

"I never did, and I was strongly tempted to send a bullet through his head."

"It would serve him right, but it would have been certain death to us. Let us get back to our posts of observation again, and listen to what they say."

It was soon discovered that the chief, Big Deer, would yield to the proposition of the white man.

After some more parleying it was agreed that the white men were to have the mine, the girl and a wooden box, and the Indians all the remainder.

"Um! make big fire; burn 'um at a stake," said the chief, speaking of the white miners who had slain so many of his warriors. "Make one big fire—big smoke—great braves—burn 'em heap much."

The boys listened, hoping to learn when the attack would be made. They discovered that it was to be delayed until night, as it was thought they could more successfully assault the stronghold of the whites by night than by day.

Bob and Phil again met behind the stone for consultation.

"Do you think he knows our hiding-place, Phil?" Bob asked.

"I don't know—he talks like it."

"He must mean it."

"It may only be told to throw the chief off the scent. It may have been done to bind the chief to his bargain, and with the hope of finding the hiding-place afterward."

"I hope he don't already know it."

"So do I."

After a few moments' silence, Bob asked:

"Hadn't we better get back to the cavern?"

"Yes."

"Then the sooner we reach it the better."

They started on their return to the ravine, slowly and cautiously, creeping inch by inch, so as not to rustle a single leaf or step on a twig that would snap beneath their weight.

They reached the ravine and descended to the ledge just as the assembly broke up, and the Indians with whoops and yells began to scatter through the wood above.

If the sharp eyes of the Indians should espy them, they would either be made targets for the arrows of the warriors, or traced to the cavern and their hiding-place discovered.

"Phil, take your rifle again in your teeth and keep a good look-out for Indians," whispered Bob.

"I shall."

Again they went crawling along the narrow ledge. Bob was in front.

An angry growl caused him to look down, and to his astonishment and alarm he discovered a huge bear not ten paces below, on the very path they would have to descend.

"Heavens, Phil, look!" Bob gasped, pointing to the bear.

Phil groaned. The Indians above and the bear below, it seemed as if all hope of reaching the cavern was cut off.

"Bob, it looks billious," said Phil, as bruin reared up on his hind legs and stood in battle array to dispute their passage.

"Yes."

Either of the boys could have shot the bear dead in his tracks; but the report of a gun would have notified the Indians where they were, and brought them howling like demons around them.

"Bob, what are we to do?"

"I don't know."

"We don't dare shoot, or throw a stone."

"Nor can we advance or retreat."

After a few moments' silence, Bob said:

"Let us try to freeze him out. Phil, it's our only hope. If we can stay longer than he can we'll have the path entirely to ourselves."

"It's a good idea," Phil said.

"It's the only plan I can think of."

There was danger of the bear growing impatient and bringing on the attack himself.

But as they sat gazing at the monster he grew impatient and finally slunk away down the path. The boys followed and bruin at last ran.

Then they reached the bottom of the ravine and hurried to the cavern, where they related what they had heard to old Silver Joe.

The old veteran miner shook his head and said:

"Boys, it looks squally. That ar Moonshine Mose is the worst varmint unhung."

"Shall we say anything to her about it?" Bob asked, nodding his head toward Rose.

"No, pore gal—she's got 'nuff trouble without knowing o' this danger. Her father's about to peter out, an' that ar pore gal's heart is jest likely to bust. Mebbe they won't find us arter all."

"But he already knows our hiding-place," said Bob.

"Who?"

"Moonshine Mose."

"How d'ye know?"

"I heard him tell Big Deer that he did."

"But Moonshine Mose is sech a liar, ye can't believe a word he sez," answered Silver Joe, pressing a good big handful of tobacco into his pipe and lighting it.

"Don't you think he knows where we are?"

"No."

"Then we have nothing to fear."

"Yes we hev, my boy," the old miner answered, shaking his head knowingly. "I tell yer, boy, ye kin depend on't that that ar' villain's figgered it out in his head about whar' we ar'. He knows we ain't gone to Greaser Gulch, because they've been a-watchin' fur us, an' know we ain't left this part o' the diggin's. Now, at dusk, he an' his cut-throats'll be ransackin' this ravine fur this hole in the ground, fur they know we're chucked away some'ars."

Bob and Phil had implicit confidence in the judgment of the veteran miner.

After a short discussion on the best mode of defense, it was determined for all three men to remain at the mouth of the cave all night.

Shortly after dusk the keen ear of Old Silver Joe heard footsteps in the ravine without.

"Jest ez I told ye, boys," he whispered, parting the veil-like moss and peering out.

"Is it he?" Bob asked.

"Yes."

"How many are with him?"

"I kin see but two."

This was carried on in a whisper, of course. Three outlaws would not be regarded as a dangerous foe to the miners, had they not known there were more within call.

The voice of Moonshine Mose was heard at this moment, saying:

"Sam, go and bring me a pine knot."

"Where'll I find one?" Sam asked.

"Go up the ravine aways. I saw several lying there. They're hidden somewhere, and I'm going to find 'em!"

Sam and another strolled up the ravine, and Bob touched Joe's arm.

"What?" Joe whispered.

"Say, Joe, I can take him in?"

"Can you?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Let me go out there, and I'll do it."

"Go, Bob; I know you kin."

Bob set his rifle down, and, drawing a revolver, cocked it.

The young miner's teeth were set, and his hand clutched his pistol with a deadly determination. Not only his own life, but the life of that noble girl depended on his courage and coolness now.

Creeping from the cavern as sly as a fox, he stole along the ravine on tiptoe. He saw the dark form of a man but faintly outlined against the wall and crept up toward him.

Moonshine Mose is looking in an opposite direction, and does not see the daring youth. Bob is at his side.

He hardly dares breathe. Clapping his revolver to the temple of the mountain outlaw, he whispers:

"Don't stir, or you are a dead man!"

CHAPTER VII.

UP THE GULCH.

"What in the——" began Mose.

"Hush—not a word, as you value your life!" hissed the young miner in his ear, and he pressed the pistol still closer against his head.

The truth dawned on the mind of the mountain outlaw.

He realized now how foolish it was of him to send the two men who had accompanied him on this dangerous expedition up the gulch, while he remained alone, braving the miners.

Big Deer, the chief, was waiting for him to report the hiding-place, and he was a prisoner. Altogether, his was an uncomfortable position.

So silent and so nicely had Bob Maxwell performed his part of the work that not even a breath of noise was heard by the myrmidons up the gulch. Moonshine Mose was not a coward, but he was not foolhardy enough to defy certain death, and he knew that to make an outcry or resistance would be to receive a bullet crashing through his brain.

"Well, what will you have?" he said, with a cool indifference.

"My hearing is very good, Mr. Moonshine Mose; so you'll please address me in a lower tone."

"Oh, of course."

"Just remain perfectly quiet now. Don't make a single move until I relieve you of some superfluous iron."

"My pistols?"

"Yes."

"I will hand them to you."

"No, you won't. I will shoot you if you attempt it. Just

let them rest in their scabbards at your side until I get ready and I will take them."

"Very well, just as you say," and the mountain outlaw stood apparently indifferent.

Bob quickly removed his weapons, and then told the ruffian that he must come with him.

"Where?"

"Down the gulch."

"Lead the way."

The youth looked at him for a moment, and with a smile, said:

"Please don't think that I am such a verdant youth, Mr. Moonshine Mose. No; you shall go before, or I shall be forced to leave you behind."

There was a peculiar cold-blooded earnestness in the manner of the youth that was not to be mistaken by as shrewd a person as the outlaw. Mose was brave, but he was not fool enough to force a certain death.

Without a word he walked sullenly down the gulch, Bob close behind him, his cocked revolver almost touching his back.

"Be careful, Moonshine Mose. Everything depends now on the way you conduct yourself," whispered Bob.

A voice was heard up the gulch softly calling:

"Mose, Mose, where are you?"

Bob knew it was one of the two men whom their chief had sent up that way, and he determined on a bold plan.

Seizing Mose by the collar, he pressed the muzzle of his revolver against his temple, and said:

"Say 'Stay where you are.'"

The prisoner was sullen and silent.

"Say it quick, or I swear I will fire!"

"Stay where you are!" Mose finally said in a low, cautious tone.

"All right; but, Mose, what are you doin' down there?"

"Say 'Keep quiet!'"

Mose was debating in his mind whether it would be better for him to suffer instant death than to be led a captive to the enemies' camp. But the pistol pressed hard against his head, and Bob, in a voice that was awful in its calmness, said:

"Say it."

"Keep quiet!"

The words were wrung out of him by the absolute certainty of death.

Footsteps were now heard coming toward them from the direction of the cave.

"Stop!" Bob whispered.

He knew not whether the newcomer was friend or foe, and with a cocked pistol in each hand waited. A dark form could be seen cautiously and noiselessly coming up the gulch.

"Can it be that some of the infernal Apaches have got below me?" the youth asked himself. "If they have, by George, I am in a very close place. I am surrounded—a perpendicular wall on either side."

A low "whist!" came from the darkness.

"Ah, that's no Apache—but then it may be one of Mose's bloodhounds."

He pushed his prisoner close against the wall of stone, and made him crouch down upon the ground.

"Now if you breathe too loud I will shoot you," said Bob.

"Whist, Bob."

He was not altogether certain that he heard his name called and refused to answer at first.

"Bob, Bob, are ye thar?"

There could be no mistake now, that voice was Silver Joe's.

"Joe, Joe, Joe!" he whispered.

"Ay—ay, pardner—what ye got thar?"

"A prisoner."

"Who?"

"Mose."

"Moonshine Mose?"

"Yes."

"Great grubs, ye don't say so."

"Yes."

"How'd ye do it, Bob?"

"Not so loud, Joe, there are more up the gulch," Bob whispered.

"Thar air—consarn ther sneakin' varmints, they'll find themselves in one o' the condemnedest leetle diffikilties one of these days what ever they run agin."

The old man spoke only in the faintest whisper, yet his whole frame trembled with ill suppressed passion as he approached the prisoner.

"Moonshine Mose, I swore y'ars ago to be even with ye," said Joe. "I'll do it yit."

Mose, brave man as he was, trembled as he felt, rather than saw, those terrible eyes on him.

"Joe, I didn't do what you accused me of—I swear it."

"Swar it, d'ye! D'ye reckon that I'd ever believe a word what left yer lips?"

"But—as I hope to live I swear it——"

"No, no, Mose, don't ye go to addin' more to yer stock o' sin. It's erbout ez much ez ye kin comfortably carry, anyway, an' I'd advise ye not to go addin' more to it."

Joe was admonished by Bob that the men up the gulch were coming down toward them. Bob was dumfounded and mystified at what he heard. There was some deep mystery more perplexing than any he had yet heard between the old miner and Moonshine Mose.

"I'm 'bout made up my mind, Bob, that we'd better tie this feller," old Joe whispered. "Now 'f ye'll keep the pistols ready to shoot him if he moves, I'll tie his hands hard an' fast behind his back."

"All right, Joe, go ahead."

"Now, Mose, look out. I ain't got much sympathy with ye nohow; an' don't yer go to puttin' on airs, 'cos I won't 'low it."

He whisked the captive about and made his hands fast behind his back.

"Now, my booty, yer ready—'bout face, march!" and he wheeled him around, and gave him a push down the gulch. Bob followed, holding a cocked revolver in each hand.

They reached the cavern and found Phil on duty at the mouth.

"Who have you there?" Phil asked.

"Moonshine Mose."

"Why don't you hang him?"

"'Cos he ain't fit to hang," old Joe answered. "He's too tarnil onery. We don't wanter disgrace a rope by hangin' uv him on it, 'specially ez we don't happen to hev any."

"There's not much use in taking such rascals prisoners. Nine times out of ten they get away and cause us a world of trouble."

"He will not get away," said Joe. "We will look arter him; an' now, Phil, we're goin' to intrust that air delikit job to you. Thar's goin' to be a leetle diffikilty up the gulch, an' we've about made up our minds to precipitate ourselves into it."

The prisoner was seated upon a large stone just within the mouth of the cavern, and the great curtain of veil moss between him and the gulch.

Phil Shelton was at his side, and the renegade knew full well that he need expect no favors of the youthful miner. By his very manner Phil indicated that it would afford him great satisfaction to put a knife between his ribs, or send a bullet through his head.

"Now, Bob, we'll see wot them two other fellers up the gulch want," said Silver Joe. "If it's a condemned leetle diffikilty

they ar' a-hankerin' arter, why, chaw my left ear if they can't hev it!"

"I am ready, Joe."

"Keep yer eyes peeled an' yer powder dry, with a sharp knife at hand, fur thar'll be har riz afore we've got through with this."

Having given this last precautionary advice, Bob and Silver Joe crept from the cavern and went slowly and cautiously up the gulch.

The bottom of the ravine was of stone and in places there were loose, shell-like rock which rattled at the touch of a foot.

It required the utmost care to keep from making a noise, and the two scouts even with all their extraordinary precaution could not avoid starting a loose stone.

A whistle sounded from above.

"Bob, I've a noshun to answer it."

"Well, do so."

Joe answered the signal by a whistle exactly similar to the one he had heard.

"Mose, Mose—is it you?"

Silver Joe was an excellent mimic and seldom ever heard a voice which he could not imitate.

"Yes," he answered, in a voice so much like Moonshine Mose's that it made even the youth start with astonishment.

They were all the while slowly advancing up the gulch.

"Bob," Joe whispered.

"Yes."

"We're goin' to hev a leetle diffikilty now in a few minits. Git behind me."

"I'm not afraid, Joe."

"Don't make no difference. Mustn't see but one uv us. Git behind me, Bob."

Bob understood now the necessity of his getting behind the old miner, and he did so. They went slowly and cautiously up the gulch, where the hum of two or more voices could be heard in conversation.

It was evident that the outlaws up in the gulch had not yet had their suspicions aroused, for they betrayed not the least excitement.

"Here comes Mose now," one of them was heard to say.

"Wonder 'f he's found it yit?"

"Dun know. Bet he hesn't."

"Waal, that old chief's gittin' mighty restless. Dun expect we kin keep 'im quiet much longer, nohow."

"What'll he do?"

"He wants ter know whar they're hid, an' ef he don't find out, why he'll say Mose lied about it, that's all."

"An' it'll be true."

A low chuckle answered this.

Silver Joe was piercing the darkness with his eyes, trying to make out how many of the whites there were, but two or three at most was all he could discover.

"It ud be a purty how'd do ef we war to run right into a hornet's nest o' them fellers," thought Joe.

They were almost on them, when one of the renegades said:

"Thar's two on 'em. Who's that with ye, Mose?"

N aonswer coming to this, one of them cried:

"Great cracky! that ain't Mose."

"Come, lad, no time fur waitin' now," old Joe whispered, and the two bounded forward with revolvers cocked.

"Surrender!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

A blinding flash and a stunning report almost in the face of the veteran miner

Joe staggered, and for a moment Bob Maxwell thought he was killed. Bob had a self-cocking revolver in each hand, and bounding forward, fired five or six shots in as many seconds at the dark figures grouped together near the bluff.

There was a yell of pain and scrambling to get out of the way..

"Joe, Joe, are you hurt?" Bob asked.

"No."

A wild yell rose on the air, seeming to come from the gulch and bluff above.

"Jemany crimany, Bob, we've percipitated ourselves into a condemned leetle diffikilty, an' no mistake," roared old Silver Joe.

"Joe."

"Yes."

"Hadn't we better retreat?"

"It kinder looks that ar way."

Those nearest the miners had retreated from before the rapid shots of Bob's revolver, but there were others on the bluff and higher up the gulch.

Footsteps could be heard coming. The voices of men shouting, and the yells of Indians gave the scene the appearance of a pandemonium.

Bob and Joe lost not a moment in retreating.

The Apaches had become impatient at the delay of Moonshine Mose in leading them against the whites, and Big Deer, already regretting the compact he had made, determined to break it, and was advancing with his warriors to scour the gulch, when the shots were heard.

"Quick, Joe! They're all along the bluff," Bob whispered.

A dozen half-naked savages could be seen running along the bluff.

"Bob, let's pepper 'em!" whispered Joe.

"Hadn't we better go to the cave?"

"No. Larn 'em a lesson. Let 'em know we're not to be fooled with," answered old Joe.

Neither Joe nor Bob had their rifles, but both were armed with revolvers, which were of the latest improved make, and would hold up to the bluff.

"Draw, Bob, an' giv' it to 'em," cried the old miner, and as they ran down the gulch they blazed away again and again, at the Indians on the bluff, until they were glad to fall back out of sight. More than one had felt the smarting sting of the miner's bullets.

Having driven them out of sight and range of the revolvers, the miners went to the cavern.

Phil was on guard, and very uneasy. Rose Thorne was at his side, and her face gleamed with pleasure at sight of Bob.

"I am so glad you came back safe," she said. "We heard the shooting, and were afraid that you had been hurt."

"No, Rose, we both came back with whole skins."

"How's yer pa, gal?" asked Joe.

"He is sleeping."

"Didn't hear that ar racket we made out'n the gulch."

"No, sir. He slept right along, but I heard it, and I was very much afraid that one of you had been killed."

"Waal, gal, I've run a good many resks an' had a power o' clus shaves, an' sich leetle scimmages ez we've her ternight ain't nothin' new to me. Ef I war alone hyar ur even hed no un but the boys I'd larff at such a fracas; but we're goin' to hev a condemned leetle diffikilty afore many hours ez we've not hearn on; an' it kinder makes me all shaky like when I think o' you a bein' here exposed to it."

"Don't be uneasy about me, Joe, I am able to take care of myself."

"But that father o'yourn all wounded, an' mebbe dyin'. He shan't fall into the hands o' the inemy agin ez long ez I live."

The prisoner had been sitting all the while near the entrance, his hands tied behind him and his head bowed.

Rose could not glance at the dark, sullen face without a shudder. That face had haunted her dreams for weeks, and she felt that the man was her evil genius.

Bob and Phil were both on guard, the former with his ear near the natural curtain, listening to the sounds up the gulch.

"Hush!" said Bob, raising his hand to his companions. "I hear them coming down the ravine."

"Then, by jemany! we've got ter clar the ship fur action," said Joe. "Here, Rose, gal, take this ere lamp back in t'other part o' the cave whar the light can't be seen."

He handed Rose the lamp and motioned her to leave. She went somewhat reluctantly, for Rose was a brave girl and would have preferred to remain and contribute her part to the defense.

All was darkness at the mouth of the cavern, and the three men stood with rifles in hand, ready to make a desperate defense should there be an assault.

Within the cavern was the brave girl, her father's rifle in her hands and his revolvers buckled about her waist.

The wounded man lay on his bear-skin rug sleeping as quietly and peacefully as a baby.

At the entrance the footsteps without grew plainer and plainer.

Someone was almost at the opening, when a voice further back warned them to be cautious.

"Come on," growled a deep voice. "How do you expect to find 'em if you don't run a risk?"

"They'll sweep you into eternity, Mike, afore ye know it."

Mike growled out something about "Puddin' head" being a coward, and ordered others to come on.

"Don't ye see nothin' o' Mose?"

"No."

"What's became o' him then?"

"He's either got rubbed out or they've got 'im in limbo, one or the t'other, I know."

"Yes, tain't in Mose to be a hangin' back when thar's work. He wants the gal too bad."

"What does he want wi' her?"

"Marry her."

Bob started and ground his teeth in his rage.

"What fur—thar's plenty o' gals back 'n the states, an' Mose, with all his eddicashun, polish an' gold, could git the best av 'em."

"But he wants this gal. I've heerd him say so."

"Why, it can't be fur money, fur thar's the mine jist er rollin' out a perfect bonanza. He kin work that."

"No, he said 'twarn't money."

"Mebbe it's love."

"Love—ha, ha, ha!"

"Hold on, puddin'head, don't yer larff so blamed loud ur ye'll be heerd by some av them fellers."

"Waal, the idee o' the boss a-bein' in love with a little whipper-snapper uv a gal like that a'most makes me split my sides, it does."

Bob was listening with an eagerness that was intense. He ground his teeth and his eyes flashed with a deadly hatred.

"Oh, I would like to choke the villains for uttering her name," he thought.

"Thar's somethin' wus'n love the matter wi' Mose. That gal he sez is wuth more 'n a gold mine," another of the ruffians was saying. "Mose said he'd lots ruther hev her'n all the gold in Arizony."

Bob listened with eager ears.

"What is the mystery about this strange mountain girl?" he asked himself. "Why should that villain prefer her to the wealth of Arizona?"

There was a moment's silence. The renegades were dangerously near the entrance to the cavern, and had apparently stopped to reconnoiter before going farther.

It was a trying moment for our friends. They dared not move—they scarce dared breathe, for the thin moss-like veil would not prevent the slightest sound from being borne to the ears of the bandits beyond.

Bob felt a soft hand laid lightly on his arm. He did not turn to look, nor could he have seen if he had turned, but he instinctively knew that it was the maiden. The touch seemed to thrill the youth.

"Waal, let's look a leetle further down the gulch. We've got to find the hole they're in ur them Apaches will scalp us. Jest ez well be killed by the whites ez the redskins. Come on!"

The heavy deep voice without was one they had not heard before. They were sure there could not be less than five or siz of the outlaws in the canyon.

They went down the gulch, and as soon as they were out of hearing the same soft hand that was resting on Bob's arm pulled his jacket gently, leading him back into the cavern until the light from the miners' lamps sticking in the wall fell on the pale yet beautiful face of Rose Thorne.

"I heard what those men said, Bob," she said.

"I did not know you were in hearing, Rose?"

"What did he mean?"

"I don't know. Did you ever have any intimation of that before?"

"Yes. Mose has talked strangely about me several times. When he was going to hang me because I would not tell where the mine was I heard him say, 'She is worth ten such mines as claim 33.'"

"Rose, your father must have the key to this mystery."

"He has."

"He is very weak. I doubt if he can live long. You ought to know something about it. Do you know that I don't believe you are the daughter of this man?"

"What, Bob?"

"I believe you are not his child."

"Why?"

"Dark hints have aroused my suspicion."

"Who gave the hints?"

"I have watched over your father when he was feverish and sick, and he let drop expressions that have mystified me."

"Oh, Bob, I am in a world of mystery. What does it all mean? Won't you explain it to me?"

"I cannot—I do not know; but your father, or the man whom you think your father, knows. I believe we ought to go to him and ask him what that mystery is."

"We will—but he sleeps now."

"Let us see."

They went to the side of the wounded man, who lay upon the bear-skin rug. Even as they gazed on him the sleeper stirred uneasily, and after a few moments opened his eyes and stared about him.

"Ah, Rose! Are you there?" he said, faintly.

"Yes, father. How do you feel?"

"Weak."

His voice was very faint, and he was evidently sinking.

"Father, Moonshine Mose has been captured, and from some of his men I have learned that there is some mystery about me. What is it?"

"I cannot tell now. I will tell, but not now," and a fit of coughing seized him.

"But think how dangerous a delay——"

A shout, a blow, and the report of a pistol at the entrance of the cavern interrupted any further conversation.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE CAVE.

"What has happened?" cried Bob Maxwell, running through the darkness to the front entrance of the cavern.

There came no answer. Some smothered voices, scuffling—and then another sharp report of a pistol.

"What is it?" asked Rose Thorne, also running to the front entrance of the cavern. "Oh, Bob, what is it?"

"I don't know. It's so dark I cannot see."

She ran back and brought a lighted lantern which threw a brilliant light over the scene and a fearful scene it was.

Phil lay helpless on the ground. He had been knocked down by a heavy blow and was either dead or senseless.

Two forms were writhing and twisting, fighting and turning like bulldogs.

It was impossible at first to tell friend from foe, they were so mingled in the desperate struggle. The fight was going on almost in the very entrance to the cavern, and large masses of the veil moss which had hidden the entrance so effectively had been torn down.

"Look—look, Bob, it is Moonshine Mose and Silver Joe," cried the girl.

Bob had already drawn his revolver and cocked it; but he dared not fire, lest he should hit the wrong man.

"Whoop-la!" roared the voice of Silver Joe. "Take that!"

Whack! came a blow which was accompanied by a yell of rage and pain.

There was a roar like an enraged tiger who had suddenly burst from his cage.

"Down him, Bob, don't yer let 'im git away!" roared the voice of old Silver Joe, and that old veteran miner struggled to his feet.

Bob needed no command, but with his revolver in his hand, he leaped through the door to catch a glimpse of the desperate outlaw flying down the gulch.

Bang! bang! bang!

Three times Bob's pistol rang out in the ravine, the echoes resounding far and wide among the rocks and hills beyond.

But Bob had lost his skill, and the bullets flew wide of their mark. The fugitive escaped, and Bob ran back to see how badly his companions were hurt.

Both were getting upon their feet, and Old Joe was giving vent to some expressions more forcible than elegant.

"He ain't natural—that ar' feller ain't a natural human bein'!" roared old Silver Joe, enraged and humiliated. "No man er livin' could a pulled the wool over my eyes ez he did. I'll not stop till I've lifted his har, yer kin bet on that!"

In his rage and chagrin the miner was dancing about the cave like a mad man.

"Oh, I want to chaw his ear. Come back here, Moonshine Mose, an' knock me down ef ye love me. Somebody do something ur I'll bust."

Bob, who was the coolest of any, realized that their hiding-place would no longer be a secret, and that they must now prepare for a siege.

"Joe, Joe!" he called.

"What yer want, youngster. Don't yer see I'm mad."

"Yes, but——"

"I want to rip that feller up the back. Aw, an' ef I git my fingers incarcerated about his breathin' apparatus he'll find a condemned leetle diffikilty about breathin'."

"What is the use of all that, Joe? He is gone, our hiding-place is discovered, and it would be much better for us to make some preparations for defending it, than to go acting in that way."

"Waal, now, boy, ye talk sense. Gin me yer hand, an' dogon my hide 'n taller 'f ye see any more sich monkey shines ez these out o' me."

"Phil, are you badly hurt?" asked Bob.

"No."

"Can you help roll stones?"

"Yes."

"What yer mean, boy?"

"I mean that we are discovered."

"I know it——"

"This cave is fortunately in a bend in the ravine, and we can roll a few rocks here in the mouth and so fortify it as to completely command both ends of the ravine."

"Yer right, boy."

"Shall we do it?"

"Of course, 'cos by daylight we'll hev 'em all about us," said old Joe.

"What weapons did Moonshine Mose take with him?"

A careful examination of the grounds showed he had only carried away a knife.

"Only a knife!" said Bob. "I should like to challenge him to a combat with knives."

"He will have other weapons before he has been away from here long," put in Phil.

"Bob's right 'bout the breastwork. We can't be rollin' rocks in here one bit too soon, nuther. I tell yer we're goin' ter hev a siege, ye kin gamble on that."

They were not long in getting ready for work. The entrance to the cave was not very wide, but it was wide enough to take a great many stones to block it up to the height of a man's breast.

All the loose stone inside the cavern was utilized, and then they had recourse to the blocks of stone on the outside.

"It's resky business out here, boys," said the old man. "That 'ar pesky sneak-thief uv a Moonshine Mose is with them other ragmuffins an' Injuns. They'll be down on us soon like er thousand o' brick."

There was not a dissenting voice save one. Little Rose Thorne came forward and asked to be allowed to take part in the dangerous and laborious work.

"No, gal, it's not fur sich ez you to work with them leetle hands o' your'n," said old Silver Joe. "Ye must 'low us ter do 't fur ye."

"But I can help."

"You must not think of it, Rose," said Bob.

"Why?"

"Because it is dangerous."

"My life is no more precious than yours," she answered.

"Allow me to take a part in our mutual defense."

"It cannot be, Rose—stay with your wounded father."

The girl seized his hand in both her own, and whispered:

"You must not go out, Bob."

"Why not? I must."

"Oh, it is so dangerous. The Indians or outlaws——"

"Hush, Rose; I am a man, and must share the dangers and trials of my companions; you are a girl—a noble, brave girl it is true—but you must not take part in this. Those little hands cannot handle the cruel stone. They would soon be cut and bleeding."

She made no answer.

Joe and Phil were already rolling in the last heavy stone found in the cavern to its place.

"Now, youngsters, we must git out o' here an' pile in some rock from the front," said Silver Joe.

"Go to your father, Rose. We will do this," Bob whispered, as he hastened from the cavern.

The sky was clear, and the moon rising flooded the mountain with yellow light.

The gulch was lighted with almost the brilliancy of day.

They soon engaged in rolling in the heavy stones to the entrance.

Little did the miners dream what a terrible siege was before them.

"That ar place takes a heap more rocks 'n I thort it would," said Silver Joe.

All the available stone near the cavern's mouth had been

used, and they began to venture some distance up and down the canyon, bringing in more to place in the breastwork.

"Boys, it ar a blamed curious fact that none o' the Injuns nur white thieves are near," said the old miner. "Can't be letting us do all this a purpose."

"No," Bob answered. "They do not know we are fortifying, or they would make an assault on our works."

Bob went a little further this time to bring a large, round stone he saw lying in the canyon. He passed around a bend in the canyon and was out of sight of his friends, when a man suddenly started up from behind a mass of rock and bounded toward him.

By the aid of the moonlight he discovered that it was Moonshine Mose. He had a knife in his hand, but no other weapon was visible.

Bob went to draw a revolver, but discovered that he had none; but his hand came in contact with a buck-horn handled knife, and he drew it.

"Come on!" he cried.

"I am coming!" answered Mose. "And now, young cock, I'll cut your comb."

With a bosom swelling with rage and hate, he leaped at Bob. There was a clash of steel against steel, and a shower of sparks were emitted from the blades of the glittering knives.

CHAPTER X.

SILVER JOE'S STORY.

From the first shock of onset, the combatants recoiled like a mighty wave, dashed with fury against a rockbound coast.

For a moment they glared at each other.

The pent-up hate of a demon seemed to gleam from the eyes of the renegade.

"Bob Maxwell, I hate you. Oh, I have longed for this hour that I might be even with you. Now tremble."

"Coward!" cried Bob, "do you expect to make me tremble."

"Yes."

"Beware of yourself, for this is a mortal combat."

"I know it and you shall die. Rose Thorne has smiled on you for the last time."

"Liar!"

Bob was furious, and with his knife ready for a thrust brought on the attack himself. Never sprang a tiger with more fury at its victim than did Bob at the outlaw.

His thrust was well aimed, too, and but for an accident, and the remarkable skill of his foe, the knife would have gone to the villain's heart.

But Bob stepped on a round stone, which turned beneath him, and he fell.

"Ha, ha, ha! now I have you!" roared Moonshine Mose, as with a yell he sprang on Bob ere he could rise, and, placing his knee on his shoulder, raised his knife for a fatal plunge.

Crack! went a pistol shot from up the canyon, and a bullet shivered the knife blade as if it was glass.

"Curse you! I will be even with you yet!" roared the villain, dropping the handle of his shattered knife and running for life down the gulch.

"Bob, Bob, the tarnil critter like ter got ye, didn't he?" cried Silver Joe, running up to Bob, who was still a little stunned and confused by the shock.

But the youth was unhurt, save one or two slight bruises. Old Joe was almost out of breath, and for a few moments panted and was unable to resume his questioning. As soon as he could, he said:

"I didn't tech yer, did I, Bob?"

"No; your bullet shattered the knife of the villain, and I am certain it saved my life."

"'Twuz all luck, boy. I shot a good deel at random, yer know, jist like the feller did when he shot at a deer. He didn't exactly know whether it war a deer or a calf, so he shot jest so's to hit it ef 'twuz a deer an' miss if 'twuz a calf. Ye see, twuzn't light ernuff fur one to see to shoot well, but that 'ar cuss hed ye down, an' I couldn't wait, so I jist banged away and busted his knife. But come on; less git these 'ere stuns up thar an' put the finishin' teches to that 'ar breastwork."

Phil Shelton, anticipating an attack, had remained near the cavern with his repeating Winchester in his hand, glancing up and down the gulch for the savages and outlaws, who had sworn to exterminate the Boys of the Mountain.

"What was it?" Phil asked. "Who fired the shot?"

"It war me, an' I guess I saved Bob's bacon by doin' it, too," said Silver Joe.

When all were safe in the cavern behind the breastwork of stone, which they had reared for their protection, Silver Joe related Bob's adventure for him. Rose, who had come forward from the side of her wounded father, and had heard the story of Bob's narrow escape, trembled with the dreadful thought of how near he had come to being a victim to the villain's knife.

"Don't go out any more, Bob," she whispered. "He might kill you. Oh, don't run any more risks."

"Rose, are you afraid for me?" he asked.

"Yes," and she blushed shyly.

Old Joe at this moment announced that the last stone had been placed on the breastwork that was necessary, and that now all they would have to do would be to sit down and wait for the pesky redskins to show their ugly faces.

The old miner had lit his pipe, and was sitting down upon a stone ready to entertain the young folks with one of his thrilling stories of personal adventures.

"That ar Moonshine Mose war a born scoundrel," said Joe.

"Have you known him a great while, Joe?" asked Phil.

"Yes, I've known him ever since he war knee high to a duck. I never knowed any good on him, neither. He's a bad un, youngsters, an' I could tell yer tales on him as would make yer har stand on end. I never feel good when I think o' him, an' I swore I'd be even with him, an' I will."

"Joe, there is some mystery about you and Moonshine Mose. What is it?" said Bob.

"'Tain't much of a mystery to me. I've sworn to kill him and I will."

"But what did he mean, Joe, when he said that he never did it?"

"He lied; he did."

"What did he do?"

"Waal, that's a story, Bob, ez would make yer blood bile."

"Tell us the story, Joe," said Bob.

"Yes, tell it," said Phil.

"Oh, do tell it," put in Rose.

"Say, gal, how's your pa?"

"Asleep."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Waal, go'n see, an' ef he is, come back'n tell me."

"Will you tell the story?"

"Don't keer 'f I do, pervidin' yer pa is asleep."

The girl went into the rear part of the cavern and returned with the announcement that the invalid was sleeping quite comfortably.

"Waal, then, set down, an' I'll tell ye one o' the wickedest, cruelest pieces o' business wot ever wuz done by anyun livin'. It war dun by that ar tarnil varmint, Moonshine Mose, who ar a bad un in every partickaler."

The old man's voice grew a little husky, and, removing his pipe from his mouth, he cleared up his throat preparatory to resuming his narrative.

"I dun know, youngsters, ez I kin git through this tale, but I'll try; ye must all set down, an', Phil, d'ye keep a purty good lookout ter see that the pesky redskins don't ketch us a nap-in'."

"Have no fears of that," said Phil, who sat in the extreme angle of the breastwork, his rifle across his knee. "Go ahead with your story and I will watch."

After a few silent whiffs at his pipe, Silver Joe said:

"I don't know ez I orter tell this tale ur think erbout it any more, bekase it allers makes me feel wuss an' meaner. It jist makes me feel like I wanted ter lift somebody's har from their head, an' I don't like sech feelin's, but I'll tell it."

"But, howsomdever, here goes. I had two brothers once. I war the oldest; thar war another younger'n me, an' another still younger'n him. 'Tain't o' the second one I'm a-goin' ter tell ye now, but o' the youngest."

"His name was Ephraim, an' he was a brave, honest fellow, with big gray eyes, an' all smiles an' good nature."

"Everybody loved Eph who knew him, and I don't think he ever did a critter any harm. He and me came out here in the West, an' went ter minin' a good many years ago. It is tough times now, but, boys, I swear I believe times war tougher then."

"Waal, we hadn't mor'n got here till who should be found on our trail but Moonshine Mose, come right inter the saloon one night, and slapped brother on the shoulder, an' said:

"Hello, Eph. How ar' yer, old boy."

"Cuss him. I'd a liked to a killed him, but I darn't do it. Mose allers had a fascinatin' way about 'im; an' the boy seemed t' kinder like him."

"Wy, boy, ye'r lookin' well," said Mose, a-lookin' at Eph, kinder lavin' at Eph. The upshot uv the whole thing wuz that in three days he hed Eph completely under his control. I'd sot a mighty sight by that boy, an' when I saw him a playin' keards an' gamblin' away every cent he hed, I felt powerful bad over it; an' I began to wish he war home."

"But Eph soon went to the dogs. He got ter drinkin' an' led on from bad to wuss. Thar war a gal in the camp he tuk a likin' to, an' I tried ter git him to give up all thort o' her, but he wouldn't; she warn't fit fur him, an' I told him so, but she'd got a powerful hold on pore Eph."

"One day seein' ez how things war agoin', I got my brother away from them people wot wuz a ruinin' him, an' I sed:

"Eph, ain't ye ashamed o' yerself?"

"Yes, Joe, I am."

"Why don't yer quit these folks, Eph, an' larn ter behave yerself."

"Poor boy, I never shall furgit how helpless-like he looked at me fur a moment; then he bowed his head and said:

"I can't, Joe. They've got sich a hold on ter me't I can't."

"Eph, you must. Don't fur the sake o' our pore old mother an' father who we left back in the states be led down ter the grave in disgrace. He cried jist like his heart would bust, an' arter awhile he said:

"Oh, Joe, I'd go but I can't."

"Why can't yer?" asked.

"I'm in debt."

"Who to?"

"Them thar gamblin' fellers an' Mose. They won all I had, an' I owe 'em some money. I can't pay it. What am I ter do?"

"Waal, folks, I war kinder stumped myself 'bout that time. I hed allers payed all my honest debts, and I'd allers wanted everybody else ter do the same thing, but when it come ter payin' a gamblin' debt that war quite a hoss av another color. I'd erbout made up my mind that he'd do erbout ez well not ter pay it. 'Twarn't no honest debt an' I told Eph so."

"What, Joe," said he, "would yer hev me repudiate my debts o' honor?"

"No, not a debt o' honor, Eph; but ther sooner yer repudiate debts o' dishonor an' the dishonorable people yer contract 'em with, the better it's er goin' ter be fur ye."

"It took a powerful sight o' talk ter make 'm see 't 'n the same light I did; but arter awhile he did, an' he consented ter do jest ez I told him. But Eph had some powerful good streaks in him, though he hed gone ter the bad an' was mighty perticular 'bout his word an' his honor."

Old Joe paused a moment in his narration to brush the gathering moisture from his eyes and sighed. The old man again placed his pipe in his mouth and smoked a few moments in silence, while his listeners, with eyes sparkling with eagerness and interest, listened.

Rose grew impatient, and in her childish anxiety asked:

"What became of your brother Eph?"

The old man slowly shook his head.

"Talmost busts my heart, gal, ter tell yer. Fact is, I never torked wi' any un erbout this afore, an' I wouldn't tork erbout it now except I've kept it, an' kept it in my buzum until I feel ez if the secret must git out or I shell bust. It's ther saddest part o' this ere tale, too. But it's er true tale. Guess I'd ez well tell it ter ye ez not, an' kinder relieve me. Waal, I got Eph ter consent ter do as I wanted him arter a powerful sight o' hard work, an' then he begin ter git ready ter leave the camp."

"Them thar cronies o' his wot hed ruined him hed their suspicions roused an' begin ter press him fur the money they'd won. Eph war high-spirited, an' when one o' ther Moonshine Mose's chaps accused him o' stealin' he give 'em ther lie! We all know wot that means. Pistols were out, two shots, an' ther rascal lay dead at Eph's feet. The killin' war all right. Eph did it in self-defense, an' in ther states would a-been acquitted, but Mose stood higher then than he does now, an' he got the vigilantes worked up to hang my brother. I knowed it, an' he war hfd in the mountings fur weeks."

"I tried—oh, how hard I tried—ter git him out o' the country across to the states, but every gap war watched, an' it couldn't be done; so poor Eph lived like a wild beast, hunted by everybody, an' shot at a dozen times a day. I sometimes saw his poor, pale face er lookin' down at me from a mounting peak, an', oh, how I did want er help him. He turned on his foes and shot 'em, rolled big stuns on 'em an' mashed 'em. I heerd 'em talkin' in ther camp erbout it, an' how they'd kill my poor brother. Oh, it war too much!"

"But it all had a end. One day I heerd a yellin' in camp, an' I knowed they'd done it. I fainted. Guess ye'll say I wuz a fool, but I hadn't eat a bite fur three or four weeks, an' I fainted outright. When I come to I never axed anything erbout it, but I heerd two fellers talkin', an' larnt it war Moonshine Mose ez hed sent the Mexikin gal up in the mountings ter lure my brother down in rifle-shot an' it wuz he thet done it."

"They wouldn't tell me whar I'd find the body, an' I dun know whar my poor brother wuz buried, ur ef he's buried at all!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE LONG SIEGE.

Completely broke down at the conclusion of his story, the old miner buried his face in his hands. Rose stood by his side, her own beautiful eyes filled with tears, as she said:

"Poor Joe! don't—don't do that. I am so sorry for you."

"Thank 'ee, gal; I'm ashamed o' myself. Wouldn't a told

this tale an' revived all them feelin's if didn't hev ter do so ter explain why I hate that onery cuss uv a Moonshine Mose. He swore he didn't do it, but I know he did."

Rose Thorne stood for a moment gazing at the man before her, and then in a voice sweet with melancholy, said:

"What name did your brother have? We have never known you only as Silver Joe."

"Gal, don't ax me that!" cried the old miner, starting up and pacing the narrow cell-like apartment. "I swore when Eph died that our names should never be known agin to mortal man till he war avenged! I am Joe—Silver Joe, the miner; but who I wuz, I'll never tell."

"But I furgot ter tell yer the strangest part o' the hull thing."

"What was it?"

"Only two or three nights ago I saw Eph."

"Saw him!" and Rose uttered a scream.

"Saw him, yes, plain ez I ever did."

"You saw him in your dream."

"Waal, yer kin call it er dream, but I saw him. Now I believe in dreams somewhat myself. I dun know whuther it wur a dream ur a wision, but I saw him, an' he said he war a-comin' back afore long an' all would be made right."

"Of course you put no confidence in your dream?"

The superstitious old miner shook his head.

"Won't deny it, Bob. I can't deny it, cos I do believe in 'em, an' can't help myself. Bet that I get revenge on the fellers wot killed Eph. Poor boy, never'll furgit how pitiful he looked ez he watched me over ther bluff on that day. I couldn't do him no good, though I'd a-died fur him. They shot him out in them wild mountings, and left him layin' till the jackals eat the flesh from his bones, an' the vultures picked out his eyes. Oh, 'twar awful."

At this moment a feeble voice could be heard calling from the rear cavern, and the old man said:

"Go, gal. Yer par's callin' yer."

Day had begun to dawn, and Joe, remembering the position in which they were placed, asked Phil who was on guard:

"Kin ye see in the gulch now?"

"Yes, but it will be lighter soon."

"See any redskins?"

"No."

"Moonshine Mose?"

"No."

"Nur any o' his crowd?"

"None of them."

"Waal, boys, it's er goin' to come, an purty quick now. I know that ther onery cuss hez told 'em whar we ar', an' we're goin' ter hev a bit o' sin here."

"Maybe you gave him a mortal wound, Joe, and he may be dying somewhere among the rocks."

"Not er bit on it. He warn't teched, I'd bet a half interest in my claim," said Old Joe. "He'll turn up yit somewhar, an' be raisin' a racket afore long."

Day had begun to dawn, and while the beleaguered miners were watching the sun rising above the crags and peaks, gilding them with a golden hue, they discovered in the distance a few redskins and whites gathered in a bunch on a large flat rock.

Fortunately Bob had brought a field glass with him, and with that he examined the group.

"He is among them," he said.

"Who? Mose?" asked Phil.

"Yes."

"Waal, then, youngsters, yer kin jist put it right down thet the thing is goin' ter come ter a head purty soon. He'll tell 'em whar we ar'."

"Yes, I see him now pointing this way," said Bob.

"Is he——" began Phil.

"Look, see, messengers are sent out."

"That settles it," growled the old miner. "We're goin' ter hev trouble soon, an' ye kin depend on 't."

In a few moments the group of Indians had all disappeared, going off in different directions.

The Boys of the Mountain, with their guns in their hands, laid behind the breastwork at the mouth of the cavern watching the hills and gulch about them.

Old Silver Joe sat behind a stone, his keen eyes sweeping the bluff above, when suddenly he caught sight of an object which for a moment arrested his attention. It was no inanimate thing such as a round black stone, for it moved.

Waiting until he had satisfied himself what it was, the old man suddenly threw his gun forward, and, taking a quick but sure aim, fired.

A wild, unearthly yell answered the shot, and a hideously painted Indian suddenly leaped out upon the air and plunging headlong down among the rocks below, lay a quivering mass in the gulch, not a dozen paces from where the beleaguered men were.

"Mark fust one fur me," growled the old man, replacing the shell.

A wild unearthly yell went up all about them.

"It has come at last," said Bob.

"Yes, and there is no telling how it will end," answered Phil with a sigh.

The Indians could be seen flitting about among the rocks along the side of the gulch up and down it. Some coming nearer opened fire on the cavern. Their bullets only flattened against the stones which formed the breastwork.

"They're havin' it a leetle too much their own way," cried the old miner. "Open up on 'em, boys, let 'em hev it."

The three repeating rifles opened up on the enemy, raking them right and left up and down the gulch. Three or four were wounded and the remainder of the Apaches retreated.

"Why don't the white man come and take part?" asked Phil.

"He's too sharp, youngster. Better believe Moonshine Mose ain't ergoin' to risk his head when he kin make cats' paws o' them pesky redskins," said Joe.

"Look!" said Bob.

"What's the matter, youngster?"

"They're going to make an assault," Bob answered.

"From which side?"

"Up the ravine."

All eyes were now strained in the direction indicated, and the Indians could be seen to the number of twenty-five or thirty in the gulch above them.

They were armed with guns, bows, spears, hatchets and knives, and all painted most hideously. Phil, who was always inclined to take a gloomy view of things, was nevertheless brave as a lion when it came to facing danger and almost certain death.

Like demons the savages came down upon them, yelling until it seemed as if all the fiends of the lower regions had suddenly been let loose in the gulch.

"Here they come, children. Look out thar, honey, or ye'll find yerself in a condemned leetle diffikilty afore ye ar' hardly aware on it."

Crack! crack! crack! rang out shot after shot among the redskins. One went down, another ran limping away, and a third, hit in the mouth, holding his hands over his face, gave vent to some of the most piteous cries, which appalled his companions, who began to retreat.

They made a feeble attempt to withstand the storm of bullets, but the shots were poured into them so hot that they beat a precipitate retreat.

The next assault was made from the lower end of the gulch, and the conflict for a moment was stubborn. Once or twice

they were almost on to the stones, when the revolvers of the beleaguered men poured a torrent of leaden hail among them.

They wavered a moment, broke and fled in wild disorder down the gulch.

"Will they attempt it again?" Bob asked.

"Yes, yer kin bet they ain't done yit," put in the old veteran miner.

"No, there's no such good luck as getting rid of them so easily," put in Phil, who, now that his courage was not tried to its utmost, was again rather disconsolate.

"No, we'll hev more infernal tricks than war ever heerd on afore we git rid on 'em. I'll tell yer, boys, we're goin' ter rub the scalpin' knife mighty clus afore we're through wi' this."

The old miner was correct in his conjectures. For before very long every device was brought to play to bring the men from the cavern.

Finding this unavailable, the siege was begun in earnest. From the tops of rocky heights and from up and down the gulch the Indian marksmen crept up as close to the cavern as they dared and opened fire.

The constant crack, crack, cracking of rifles rang out from above, below and across the gulch.

Bullets flew like rain about the breastwork, and they kept close behind the rocks, or they would have been riddled with shots.

A hundred yelling demons seemed to be gathered all around them.

But when they approached too near they paid the penalty. An arm or leg could scarce be exposed to the aim of the miners before a bullet struck it.

They came out over the bluff above the cavern, and tried to drop stones down upon the beleaguered men, but the bluff projected out too far.

Every effort on the part of the besiegers was frustrated by the besieged. They finally settled down to starve them out.

Day by day went by, and the miners in the cave found their small stock of provisions growing frightfully smaller.

"We are going to starve," said Phil.

They put themselves on short allowance in order to make their provisions last longer. They had not had a very large stock in the beginning, and certainly not enough to last them many weeks.

"Boys, it do look gloomy," said the old miner one morning.

"I have about given up," Phil answered.

Rose was in another part of the cavern with her father, and did not overhear this conversation.

"Never give up," said the hopeful Bob. "While there is life there is hope."

"I know that's so, Bob," put in the old man, "but I do declar it begins ter look mighty dark jist now. I wish I could see some daylight out o' this hut, but I can't. It's all dark."

"Help will surely come to us from Greaser Gulch," said Bob.

"Dun know; we're'n a part o' the mounting whar people seldom travel, an' I tell yer the chances are we'll fight it out alone. Leastways the chances are now that we'll hev a long siege."

CHAPTER XII.

A MYSTERIOUS FACE.

Day by day the besieged men grew thinner, more hollow-eyed and haggard. Hunger and starvation, like some monster seemed to have seized upon them and to be gnawing at their vitals.

Bob grew more haggard than the others.

It was learned that half the short allowance of food given to him he had turned over to Rose, fearing she might suffer.

"Bob, you must not do that," said the fair girl when she learned how the brave fellow was starving himself in order that she might not suffer.

"I will, Rose. I am a man. I am strong and better able to endure privation than you."

"But how long will you keep your strength if you starve yourself."

"Take the food, Rose, you must be in need of it."

"No, keep it—eat it yourself."

"I am not hungry," he said.

"Oh, Bob, Bob—what a noble fellow you are. Heaven grant that we may escape from this golden cave, which seems likely to prove a cave of death."

"Rose, I want to say something to you," said Bob.

They were alone in the long natural corridor which ran between the outlet and apartment in which the wounded man lay.

"What do you want to say, Bob?" she asked, for she saw that the poor fellow hesitated.

"We are both young, Rose, and we know but little about each other, save what we have learned in the short time we have been here in this mountain cave; but you seem to be a life-long acquaintance. I am an orphan, and you soon will be."

Rose began to sob, and Bob, after a short and awkward silence, said:

"Rose, you will want someone then to take care of you."

She made no answer.

"Won't you let it be me?"

"I would just as soon it would be you as anybody," she answered.

Before Bob could say anything more Silver Joe came through the corridor and said:

"Gal, how's yer pa?"

"He is asleep."

"Gits weaker, don't he?"

"Yes."

"I wor afeerd so. Don't believe he kin last a great while. I must take a look in on him."

The old man hurried away into the apartment where the wounded man lay.

"Rose, he takes a wonderful interest in your father."

"He does, Bob. The other night I witnessed a most curious sight."

"What was it?"

"I had fallen asleep over my father and, on awakening, saw Silver Joe bending over him on his knees. The tears were actually in the old man's eyes, and he was praying for my wounded father. The strangest thing of all was that he wasn't using that odd talk which he used all the time. He was speaking in language as good as any one ever uses."

Old Joe came back through the grotto at this moment and, passing by Bob, said:

"Come here, youngster, I want ter tork ter yer some."

"What is it, Joe?"

"We're in a clus fix," and the old fellow cast an anxious glance at the great chamber, which was at this point fully sixty feet high, and had an opening in the top wide enough for a person to have crawled out of it.

"I know we are in a pretty close place, Joe, but I can't see any way to get out of it."

"Nor I—unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless we could fly up to the top thar and git out through that hole."

"Don't you think the Indians are there?"

"No. I've watched that ar spot right clus all the time, an' not a single painted red face hev I seen."

"Well, Joe, it would be impossible for us to reach that opening," said Bob.

"I know it, boy. I've laid more'n a hundred plans ter git up at that ar hole in ther top o' ther ground, but I swar I can't fix it up no way."

A hundred plans had been devised by every one of the beleaguered men, and every one had to be abandoned as wholly impractical.

"But one plan is left," said Bob, when he and old Joe had joined Phil in the opening.

"I 'spect, youngster, 't you 'n me ar' thinkin' o' the same thing," said Silver Joe.

"My only plan, and it is a very slim chance at that, is to make a sortie on the Indians and cut our way through them, run for our lives, and if any of us are left, go to Greaser Gulch."

Old Joe had been refilling his pipe, and was very thoughtful.

"Waal, boy, I kinder guess thar ain't any other show but that, an' it's a small 'un. What yer going' ter do with the wounded man?"

"I have been thinking of him," said Bob. "It will not do to go away and leave him."

"No, I wouldn't 'low that," and the old man lit his pipe and proceeded to smoke.

"We must take him with us."

"Yes."

"It is not an easy thing to do," put in Phil.

"No; but it can be done."

"How?"

"Make a litter, place him on it, and two of us swing it over our necks, and leave our arms free to fight."

"Wall, boy, thar's a chance—a bar' chance o' 'us gittin' away erlive; but thar ar' ten great big chances o' us hevin' our ha'r lifted afore 'we've gone three hundred steps."

"What is the result if we stay here?" asked Bob.

"We'll starve."

"Is it not better to die fighting to escape our foes than to starve in this cavern?"

"Guess yer right."

"I see another head poking around the rocks," said Phil.

"Then plug it—put a bullet in it—but be sure yer do; cos we ain't got no bullets ter spar."

Phil prided himself on his marksmanship, and he was in reality a good shot. He leveled his rifle at the head and pulled the trigger.

A yell answered the shot, the head disappeared and appeared a moment later in another place.

"Well, that beats anything I ever saw," said Phil. "I've been a blazin' away at that head all day an' never brought it down yet."

Bob raised his field glass and, gazing at it, said:

"It's no wonder, Phil. You have been shooting at a dummy. That is not a genuine head."

"Better quit shootin' at dummies, Phil, cos we've got ernuff o' ther rale critters ter shoot at without botherin' with dummies."

The day wore on, and at noon the small allowance of food for dinner was doubled, as they would need all their strength for the perilous and toilsome task before them.

There was no danger of an assault now, for the Indians, determined on starving them out, seldom fired a shot.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and Rose, who was in the large chamber, through which was a sort of skylight, gave utterance to a wild shriek of terror.

Bob sprang to his feet and ran to the great cavern.

"What is it, Rose?" he asked.

"Look! look! look!" she cried, pointing up at the opening above.

Bob turned his eyes up in that direction and saw a horribly painted face glaring down at them.

The youthful miner started back and, cocking his gun, raised it to his shoulder, but just as his finger was about to touch the trigger, which would send a bullet through the mysterious face, he was seized from behind and the gun wrenched from his hands.

CHAPTER XIII.

A MESSAGE FROM ABOVE.

"Don't do it, boy!"

It was Silver Joe who had seized Bob's arm and prevented him shooting the mysterious face.

"Why, Joe."

"That's no innemy."

"How do you know?"

"Had it been a innemy he'd a not gin us any warnin', but went to slingin' lead an' arrars at us."

When Bob glanced again at the opening above, the mysterious face had disappeared.

Bob was mystified and amazed at the manner of the old miner.

"Joe, do you know who that was?"

"Who?"

"The face?"

"No."

"It was an Indian's face."

The opening above was darkened again; the next moment a heavy object fell upon the ground before the two miners.

They started back in astonishment, and well they might, for there on the ground before them lay a dead deer.

"Now, boy, don't yer see it's a friend?"

"Yes; no enemy would be supplying us with provisions."

"That ar deer hain't been killed very long," said Silver Joe.

"Who is it—what does it mean, Bob?" Rose whispered, coming to Bob's side, and laying her hand on his arm.

"I don't know, Rose, but he's our friend."

"Can he help us?"

"I feel sure that we are saved," he answered, and pointed to the dead deer. "See, there is food."

The girl gave utterance to a cry of joy, as she said:

"Oh, Bob, you shall have all the food you will want," cried the girl, clasping her hands in joy.

"We will all have all the food we shall want, Rose, and better still."

"What, Bob?"

"We all have an opportunity to escape."

"How?"

"We have a friend above."

Rose clasped her hands in her joy, and cried:

"Then Bob is safe, Bob is safe."

"Dun yer be a kalkerlatin' on too much, gal, fur I tell yer we can't allers depend on signs, yer know. Thar's a friend up thar 'n no mistake, but them ar' redskins an' outlaws ar all erround 'im, an' we mought find ourselves in a condemned leetle diffikilty in gittin' out arter all," said Silver Joe.

The bright young face grew sad, and the old miner, seeing that he had probably alarmed her unnecessarily, added:

"Say, leetle gal, I didn't mean to skeer yer. We mought git away without much diffikilty, but it's allers best not ter kalkerlate that way. Be prepared fur the wust. That's ther way I allers feel erbout sich things, yer know. Ef yer prepared fur the wust, an' ther wust don't happen, yer feel orful good that yer disappointed."

Grand, noble old Joe, so kind and tender-hearted he would not harm a mouse, but so brave and daring that he would give his life any time for the weak and helpless. Dangerous as he

was to Indians and evil-doers, he was all gentleness to the innocent.

"One thing, leetle gal, yer kin depend on, an' that is, thar ar' them here ez'll die afore a hand shall tech ye."

"I don't want any one to run any risk or brave any extra danger for me," said the fair girl.

At this moment Phil sounded a whistle which was a danger signal, and old Joe and the youth grasped their rifles and ran to the breastwork.

"What is the matter, Phil?" Bob asked.

"I hear a noise——"

"What like?"

"I believe it's only hogs grunting."

"Hogs!" cried the old man. "Dun ye be fooled about it."

Phil had mounted the stone works with his rifle in his hand, and was straining his eyes to catch a glimpse of the object creating the noise.

"Say, pilgrim, git down from thar if ye don't want more quills 'n a porcupine. Fust thing yer know it 'll jist be a-rain-in' arrers all round ye."

Phil was not a heedless youth, and he knew that old Joe's advice was worth something. He climbed down from the pile of stones and watched from a safe corner.

Not a sign of a redskin was to be seen. The day wore on and night came, and the guard was doubly vigilant.

"I guess, youngsters, I'd better stand guard myself ternight. You fellers ar' young an' jest a leetle bit green. Yer moughtn't be able ter tell a nigger frum a tree, an' they mought slip up on yer unawars an' skulp yer afore ye knowed it."

"We don't want you to take all the risk, Joe."

"Never mind 'bout that now, kid—it's all right. D'ye two lay right down an' go ter sleep."

"I hear that hog grunting again," said Phil.

"Waal, I'll bet three ter one that ar' blamed hog's made inter pork afore morning'."

The boys wrapped their blankets about them and lay down on the hard, rough stone to sleep with their rifles at their side. Bob lay a long while awake, watching the old scout as he sat upon the pile of stones, his form outlined by the starry sky fanned by the gentlest zephyrs of night.

Bob's thoughts were busy. He thought of his home, his parents and loved ones in that far-off land where sunny peace and contentment dwelt. How different the contrast with this wild lawless region. Then his thoughts busied themselves on the mystery by which he was surrounded. Claim Thirty-three was in itself a mystery. The wounded man, the beautiful Rose, and even that gallant, brave old miner sitting on the heap of stones was a perplexing mystery.

Wearied at last with anxious watching, he went to sleep while the distant grunt of wild swine fell on his benumbed senses.

The old man who was watching from the top of the heap of stones, heard the grunting and smiled. To an unsophisticated person the noise would seem to be hogs rooting in the ground and grunting, but to that old veteran it was evident that there were no hogs to grunt or t root about among the stones. The sound was very natural, but wild swine are never found as high up in the mountain and in such a stony region as they were.

He fixed his eyes in the direction of the sound, and a grim, determined look is on his face. That cold steel-like glitter—that sinister smile and the rigidity of his muscles gave the old man the appearance of a human tiger about to spring.

"Ughf, ughf, ughf!" grunted the hogs.

And now his keen eyes discern a dark object which looks very much like a large hog coming down the gulch, seeming to hover in the shadows of the cliff, as though it was afraid of coming out too much in the light.

The old man coolly lit his pipe, then slipped down from the

pile of stones just as if he had got tired of sitting and preferred to stand.

He took one more peep down the gulch and saw quite a drove of hogs coming toward the rocks.

"Guess we'll hev bacon," thought the old man.

Going to Bob, he seized his shoulder and shook him quite smartly.

"Bob, Bob, Bob!" he whispered.

"What do you want?"

"Did yer ever hear a pig squeal?"

"Yes."

"Then wake Phil, git yer guns an' listen."

Bob, somewhat mystified and bewildered at the singular manner of the old man, turned to his companion and shaking him, said softly:

"Phil, Phil, wake up; something terrible is going to happen!"

"Yes, I am awake," said Phil, and in a moment both the boys had seized their guns and were watching the maneuvers of the old man.

With his long barreled rifle, he was peering over the ridge of stones, his rifle lying between two large round rocks.

His gun was cocked and his eye glancing down the barrel, which was in direct line with the hogs coming up the gulch. A sharp, quick report rang out on the air, and with a tremendous yell the foremost of the dark objects leaped to his feet, and ran howling up the gulch a few rods, fell, screamed and kicked, and beat the air.

Three or four others ran to the wounded man and hurried away with him.

"Did yer ever heer a pig squeal?" the old man asked with a quiet chuckle. Half a dozen arrows whizzed among the rocks, but the redskins knew better than to attempt to carry the fortification by storm, for they had had quite enough of fighting at close quarters with the miners.

"The infernal varmints," chuckled the old man. "D'they expect to ketch me er nappin'? They don't fool me with their gruntin'!"

The Indians could be heard hooting and yelling like fiends along the brow of the cliff, but they did not dare venture within rifle shot of the white men again.

"You boys kin lay down an' go ter sleep agin," said the old man, after having indulged in a laugh at the expense of the Indians, whose ruse he had discovered. "They ain't agoin' ter bother us agin soon."

Bob and Phil had such implicit confidence in the old man's judgment that they slept soundly the remainder of the night.

At early dawn all were awake, and the wounded man was found to be a little stronger. Joe's solicitude for Mr. Thorne was remarkable.

"Bob, do you notice how anxious Silver Joe is about the wounded man?"

"I have noticed it, Phil."

"He seems to take the same interest in him he would in a brother."

"Yes, but old Joe has a heart in him as big as a mountain."

"I know it. And yet there is something about the wounded man which I don't like. I don't think he is as good a man as Joe."

"No—there are but few men who are."

"Joe must feel that, and yet he said he did not know that anyone lived here, until he stumbled right on them. He must have been in ignorance of the existence of Mr. Thorne before that time."

"There are many queer things happening about here now."

The boys were near the entrance on guard, and the old miner had gone into the interior apartment to look after the wounded man.

Bob and Phil sat for several moments in silence listening to

the wind sougning down the gulch or groaning among the blasted pines above their heads.

Suddenly the boys heard the rapid tramp of feet coming down from the corridor, and with a quick, gasping cry, Rose Thorne again sprang to the side of Bob.

"What is the matter, Rose?" he asked.

"It's there again."

"What?"

"The face."

"At the opening?"

"Yes."

"Well, Rose, don't tremble so. You need not be frightened, for that face is the face of a friend."

"I know, I know, and yet there is something so terrible about it that I cannot bear to gaze upon it."

"Don't be frightened, Rose, nothing shall harm you."

"Oh, Bob," she whispered, clinging close to the miner. "I am more afraid on your account than on my own. What if some harm should befall you?"

"Rose, Rose, don't think of it. We are all in equal danger, and there is no more danger to me than to you, or anyone else."

"I know it—but—"

"Say, what the tarnation iz all this ere racket about?" asked old Joe, at this moment appearing on the scene.

"Rose has again seen the face at the opening," said Bob.

"Waal, I kinder wish I could see that ar' face at the openin' myself," said the old man after a few moments' thought. "By ginger, mebbe it's thar yit."

They all repaired to the great subterranean chamber which was tolerably well lighted with the skylight-like opening in the roof.

"Yes, thar's the face," said Silver Joe.

The three miners halted and gazed up at the dark, red face—hideously painted, the head decorated with feathers—gazing down upon them.

"Bet he's up ter suthin'," whispered old Joe.

A moment later the face disappeared, and only the small patch of clear sky was visible to the imprisoned men below.

"He has gone!" said Phil, with a sigh, as if the last lingering hope which he had had departed with the mysterious face.

"I believe he will come back," said Bob.

"Bet he will! He ain't a lookin' down that ar hole jist fur fun."

"Maybe he will throw another deer down," suggested Rose.

"No, gal, he won't do that. He knows we've got meat ernuff ter last us fur two or three days, and that ar feller, whoever he is, ain't a-goin' ter fool away any meat."

"Look, look, he is there again," whispered Bob.

Once more the opening was darkened, and the face was to be seen.

He had some object to which a string was attached, and he was lowering it down to the bottom of the cavern.

"What is it?" asked Rose.

"Bark."

"Maybe it's some infernal machine fixed to kill whoever touches it," suggested the cautious Phil.

"I will see," said Bob, advancing to the package of bark.

But Rose seized his hand and said:

"No—no, don't—don't go near it; it might kill you."

Old Silver Joe picked it up and said:

"It's nuthin' but some bark with writin' on the inside. Here, Bob, read it."

Bob unrolled the bark and read:

"I am a white man who has been a long time with the Apaches and adopted into their tribe. I can aid you to escape. Send me paper and pencil if you have one, and I will explain."

CHAPTER XIV.

WORKING THE CAVE MINE.

The writing was on the inside of a piece of birch bark, and had been done with a bit of red stone.

"What do you think of it, Bob?" Phil asked, after our hero had read the writing.

"I think it's true."

"I don't know—it may be a trap."

"I don't believe it."

"Don't trust them too far."

"Waal, Phil, don't yer be so all-fired suspicious. Ef that ar red face hed been a inemy tryin' ter kotch us, couldn't he long ago hev rigged up some way to hev dropped the redskins down on us when we warn't a-lookin'," asked Silver Joe.

Silver Joe's question was a poser, which his companions could not answer.

"Have we a pencil and paper?" Bob at last asked.

"I think I know where there is one," said Rose.

"Where?"

"In the big wooden chest you carried in from the shanty before it burned. Come, Bob, we'll go and get it."

The big wooden chest had been taken to the apartment in which Mr. Thorne, the wounded miner, lay. It was near the wounded man and he watched it for hours at a time.

When they entered this part of the great cavern, Mr. Thorne was lying asleep on his bearskin rug. Not wishing to disturb him, Bob went quietly to the great chest in which was the key and unlocking it, lifted the lid.

The click of the lock aroused the sleeping man, and, starting up, he seized Bob's hand as he was about to remove some articles, and cried:

"No, no, you shan't—you shan't! While I live I swear no one shall ever know——"

The amazed youth looked down in astonishment at the pale, wild, haggard features and uttered not a word. Like some one wildly insane, he pulled at Bob and shouted:

"Don't touch the box! As you value your life don't touch the box——"

"Why?"

"Because I have sworn it shall never be known until I am dead!"

A glance in the open chest revealed a small square box, half concealed by some papers. It was a wonderful box, made of oak, highly finished and inlaid with pearl and precious stones. The box was not over a foot square and almost as thick. The wounded man in his frantic struggle had risen up by the side of the chest and jerked some papers over the box so as to hide it from view.

"Rose, Rose, ungrateful girl, have I not given all my life to you?"

"Yes, father. What do you mean?"

"Why will you let me be robbed? Why allow your foolish curiosity to get the better of you, and come here to search out the hidden mysteries within that box?"

"Father, we were only looking for a pencil and paper."

"Girl, will you lie to me that way?"

"Oh, father!" sobbed Rose, for those cruel words, the first her father had ever used to her, almost broke her tender heart. "Did I ever lie to you?"

"Not before this. But I know it was the box you wanted."

"Ah, father, as heaven is my witness, I assure you it was only a pencil and paper we wanted."

Bob then explained how a white man, who had for a long time been among the Indians, proposed to save them and that they were looking for pencil and paper in order to communicate with him.

"All right. I will get them for you," said the wounded man, and, dragging himself up by the side of the great wooden chest, he thrust his left arm into it and fished out several sheets of paper and a pencil.

"There!"

He threw them at the feet of the youthful miner and then, closing down the lid of the chest, locked it, put the key in his pocket and fell exhausted by the side of it.

Bob and Rose took the pencil and paper from the floor, laid the wounded man back on the bearskin rug, and both, filled with wonder, left the apartment for the great chamber in which Silver Joe and Phil were waiting.

The long cord reaching up to the natural skylight above was still there waiting for them to attach the paper and pencil to it. This they quickly did, and the man above, who was watching them, drew them up.

A moment later he dropped something down and made a quick, excited gesture.

Bob picked up a sheet of paper and read:

"Run to the front, quick, as you value your lives."

"Dog my cats, ef we ain't a-been playin' tarnil fools!" cried Joe. Seizing his rifle, he was half way to the entrance before the exact idea of danger had made itself plain to the minds of the boys.

But they were not slow to follow him.

"Go back, Rose—back to your father!" cried Bob, who, even amid the greatest danger, thought of the girl's safety.

"What is it?"

"Indians!"

Bang! bang!

"Git, yer tarnil varmints! Don't yer think yer a-goin' ter git this chap a-nappin'."

It was all over by the time the boys reached the front.

The Indians, who had been trying to steal in on them while they were within the cavern, were all in full flight.

Bob and Phil each sent a shot after them, and they disappeared around among the rocks.

"Four shots, an' not a single Injun ter show fur it!" growled the old man, who was not the least pleased with their ill success.

After a few moments Rose came in and handed them a scrap of paper, on which was written:

"I cannot stay here all the time, as it might create suspicion, and the Indians might come up after me. They know nothing of this means of entrance into the cavern. I am making a rope of hair and will have it done in a few days. As soon as it is done you can come out by means of it. Get all your valuables and bring them with you."

"Waal, boys, that's ther right kind o' tork," put in Old Joe.

"Why not be at work while he is," said Bob.

"Work, how?—work on what?" asked Phil.

"Work this mine. Don't you see we have tools enough to take out a thousand dollars a day. We can put it away—hide it—put it in cache, and they will not be able to find it."

"Won't do us much good if we get scalped," said Phil.

"But it'll do all us a heap o' good ef we're not scalped," put in the old miner.

"Yes, and if we do get killed, it will not be any worse on us because we have worked the mines."

"An' we got nuthin' else ter do."

Fortunately they had brought some of their mining tools with them, and with these, two proceeded to work, while one stood guard.

The Indians could be seen a great distance away, but they took pains not to come within range of the miners' rifles. Whenever they did, they paid very dearly for it.

The mine in the cavern proved to be much richer than the mine down the gulch.

"I wonder what that red face is doing now?" Phil asked

one day, as they all three stood in the mouth of the cavern, resting and watching.

It had been three days since the miners had had any communication with their mysterious friend.

"He's makin' a rope," said Silver Joe.

"Yes, maybe it's a rope to hang us."

"No; I'll gamble on him a bein' honest," said the old man.

"Maybe it's one of those bandits dressed up and fixed to deceive us," said Phil.

"Yer makin' too much ado about nuthin'," put in old Silver Joe.

"It's always best to be prepared for the worst."

"Yer needn't be afeerd o' bad luck ever comin' an' ketchin' yer a nappin', Phil," put in Silver Joe. "Ye'll allers keep even with bad luck."

"We will hear from him soon," said Bob.

"I hope so."

"Bet we do, too."

"There are Indians over the hill."

"Yas, pilgrim, but they ar' too far away ter do us any harm, an' they ain't got a hankerin' arter comin' nearer."

At this moment Rose came from the interior and said:

"He's there again."

"Who?"

"Old Red Face."

"I'll go'n see what he wants," said the old miner.

He went into the great subterranean apartment, where through the skylight he saw the face of the man glaring down at them.

It was now devoid of some of its paint, and they could see that it was a white man.

He dropped something to the ground, and as Bob, who had followed Silver Joe, stooped to pick it up, the old miner gave utterance to a shriek which rang throughout the cavern.

"Eph! Eph!" he cried and fell senseless upon the ground.

CHAPTER XV.

WAITING FOR THE NIGHT.

"Joe, Joe, Joe," cried Bob, bending over the prostrate man. "Poor fellow, he has lost his mind."

A moment later Joe struggled to his feet, and gasped:

"I saw him, I saw him!"

"Who?"

"Eph!"

"Impossible."

"I did, I'd swar it."

"It was imagination."

"No—I'd swar I saw my murdered brother lookin' down through that 'ar hole in the ground."

"You were mistaken, Joe."

The old miner again raised his eyes toward the skylight-like opening, and said:

"He's gone."

It was so. The face had disappeared from the opening, and but for the roll of paper lying in the bottom of the corner both of them might have supposed the whole thing a freak of the imagination.

"What was it?" cried Rose, who had followed close after them, and seen the strange actions of Silver Joe, and was unable to comprehend them. "Oh, what is it, Bob? Did someone strike Joe from above?"

"No."

"What is the matter?"

The distressed girl wrung her hands in a terrible agony of dread.

"No, gal, I saw 'im."

"Who?"

"Eph."

"Your dead brother?"

"Yes, my dead brother what wuz murdered. I saw 'im ez plain ez I ever saw anyone, an' I warn't asleep, neither—war I, Bob?"

"No."

"Bob saw 'im."

"Did you, Bob?"

"I saw a white face, but I don't know who it was."

"It war Eph, I'd swar it. It war my brother wot wuz killed five years ago in the mountings."

"You were mistaken, Joe. It was only a remarkable resemblance."

"No resemblance, Bob. I know my brother Eph. No other person ever looked like Eph, an' that war Eph."

"But he is dead!" gasped Rose Thorne, her face turning deathly white.

"Yes, gal, he's dead!" said Joe. "I allus did believe in the dead comin' back ter help the livin' when they war in diffikilties, an' I guess this ar' an instance o' it."

"You will find in the end, Joe, that the being who is helping us is no ghost, but a person of substantial flesh and blood, just like we are."

"Well, I don't believe it, Bob. Yer kin call me foolish if yer want to, but that war Eph. I know that, an' Eph ar' dead. Now just tell me how yer ar' goin' to account fur it?"

"There is the roll of paper he dropped, and it is not a ghost, I know," said Bob, and, stooping, he picked up the paper.

"Don't, don't touch it, Bob—oh, please don't!" cried Rose.

"Why?"

"It may be bewitched."

Bob laughed.

"Why, Rose, you are almost as superstitious as Joe himself."

"Boy, yer needn't make light of our superstitions, ez yer call 'em, 'cos thar's some mighty quar things a-happenin' in this ere wild, out o' the way part o' the world. That war Eph's face—I know Eph's face."

"We will see what this is."

Bob unrolled the paper and read:

"The rope ladder is now ready, and tonight I will lower it for you to escape. Have everything ready. Bury what treasure you cannot bring with you."

"Well, this is certainly very substantial," said Bob. "I don't think any ghost ever wrote it."

"Lem me see it, Bob. Lem me bring that ar' writin' to the front an' git a good look at it," said Silver Joe.

The miner's eyes were getting a little old, and Rose remembered that her father had a pair of glasses which it was thought might aid him some. She brought them for him.

Putting on the spectacles the old miner glanced at the handwriting and cried:

"It's Eph's—it's Eph's! I'd swar it war Eph's handwritin'."

"Don't you know that other handwriting might be similar to his?"

"I know it; but not exactly—no, not exactly. That's not like Eph's handwritin'. It is Eph's handwritin', an' I know what I'm a-talkin' about."

"What? Must we depend on a ghost?" Rose asked.

"It's Eph; and be he dead or be he alive I know I kin depend on Eph," said Silver Joe.

"We have nothing to do but wait until night," said Bob.

"The Apaches and Moonshine Mose are busy at some scheme," said Phil.

"What?"

"They have cut a large pine log, which they are rolling into the gulch."

"What good will that do them?" Bob asked.

"No, I see now; it's a bundle of small pine logs rolled up together and tied like a bale of hay, except the bundle is round instead of square," said Phil.

Phil had the powerful field-glass, and through it was watching their maneuvers.

"Some o' their tarnil deviltry, but 'twon't pay 'em," growled Silver Joe.

To the boys the maneuvers of the enemy was a matter of mystery, while the smile on the face of the old man indicated that he comprehended the situation, and would be equal to the emergency.

But when the Indians, aided by the outlaws, began rolling the bale or bundle of pine logs down the gulch toward the cavern, their object became apparent to all.

"They are going to close in on us," said Phil.

"Look, there comes another," cried Rose, who was looking down the gulch.

All eyes were turned in that direction, and a second bale of pine sticks was seen slowly revolving up the gulch.

"I'll bet we hev some warm work thar," said old Joe. "They're desprit men in a desprit cause, an' 'll come to a desprit end afore they knows it."

Bob Maxwell, who was watching the great bundles of sticks and logs slowly rolling up toward the opening, took in the situation. The nearer the bundles came to the cavern, the slower and more cautious they moved.

At last from around one end a head appeared, a rifle flashed and a bullet came whizzing among the rocks.

Down the gulch there came another flash, and a second ball whizzed among the rocks, and a party of savages on the bluff across the gulch at the same moment opened fire on them.

But the Boys of the Mountain were not to be intimidated by the assault. The keen-eyed marksmen soon made it dangerous for a head, arm or leg to be exposed.

The guns of the enemy were soon silenced, and not a head was shown for hours.

"They are waiting for night!" said Phil.

"So are we," put in Bob.

"As soon as it is too dark for us to see they will begin rolling those bales of logs and sticks upon us and have us overwhelmed before we know it."

Bob took a hopeful view of affairs. He thought they might escape by means of the ladder, which was to be lowered at night before the Indians were on them.

"How 'bout the wounded man an' the old oaken chist? He won't go without 'em," said Joe.

"We can't get them up," said Phil.

"Leave 'em down here?"

"Yes."

"Waal, then, we'll all stay with 'em."

"What do you mean, Joe?"

"I say 'f that ar' wounded man don't go out, nobody shall. He may a-been bad in his time—done a sight o' deviltry, but now he's helpless, an' he shall not be left ter die."

There was a look of astonishment on the face of the boys and the girl. Indirectly Silver Joe was acknowledging that he knew something of the life of the wounded man.

But Joe said no more on the subject.

Bob, after a moment's reflection, thought that two strong men might hoist the wounded man through the opening above, and also hoist up the chest.

"I expect we can," said Phil, when Bob had laid his plan before them, "providing we don't have the redskins and mountain outlaws a-blazin' away at us from this side."

"Boys, let's t'ar off some rocks from the side o' ther cave,

an' build another breastwork in that narrer pass between here an' the big chamber."

"Can we do it?" Phil asked.

"What?"

"Fill up the narrow passage-way!"

"In course we kin."

"Where will we get the stone?"

"Tear them off the walls with the picks. There is a lot of loose, shale-like rock on the wall."

Phil was left to guard the entrance, and his quick rifle and sure aim held the enemy at bay.

The crack, crack, cracking shots heard from the entrance announced that the rifle of Phil was active.

Bob and the old miner, with picks and crowbars, began work getting out stone. Great loose slabs were torn off.

When they found one slab a little more obstinate than the others they put some giant powder in the seam and blew the stone loose.

At the removal of every seam of rock thin plates of gold could be seen.

"Save 'em all, boy, save 'em all," said old Joe. "We'll need 'em when we git out o' here."

The heaps of yellow treasure increased hourly on their hands.

But the two men at last sat down almost exhausted, and as Bob wiped the perspiration from his face he gazed upon the heap of gold which they had piled up at their side.

It represented a small fortune, and yet he thought more of the rough, rude stone which lay in heaps all about them.

"Joe, that gold would make us rich anywhere but here."

"Yer right, Bob. But 'tain't wuth a continental cuss ter a lot o' fellers hemmed in, an' starvin' ter death ez we ar'. Why them rocks ar' wuth more bekase they'll turn bullets much better'n gold will."

Joe picked up a stone with one hand, and a handful of gold with the other.

"'Tain't no use o' talkin', boy," he continued. "We couldn't do nuthin' with a mountain o' gold here. Them rocks is wuth jist as much ez the gold, an more too."

After resting a few moments, the men began rolling and carrying the stone to the inlet.

Night was approaching rapidly, and they knew that what they did must be done quickly. The Indians, as it grew dusk, could be seen pressing in on them up and down the gulch.

The great bales of logs were rolled slowly nearer and nearer.

Once Phil succeeded in bringing a yell of agony in answer to a shot. But the Indians took good care to keep well behind their breastworks, and rolled them still nearer.

Ten to one, they could easily overwhelm the whites should they succeed in reaching them.

When Phil communicated this to old Joe, he studied a moment and said:

"Boys, we must carcumwent 'em."

"How?"

"Gather up all the pine knots we hev, an' take 'em up and down the gulch, an' put 'em in two piles, then set fire to 'em, an' they'll light up the gulch fur an hour yit, jist like 'twar daylight."

"Who will do it?" Phil asked.

"I will," said Bob.

"No, you might get hurt—it's almost sure death to anyone who attempts that. I'll do it myself," put in Phil.

"Hold on, boys, that ar' war my leetle scheme, an' I guess I'll do it," said Joe.

So the pine knots, save one or two for interior lights, were gathered up, and they waited for the shades of night to deepen.

CHAPTER XVI.

AIDED BY A GHOST.

As soon as he thought it dark enough, old Silver Joe gathered up the pine knots and, creeping up the gulch, placed them in the right position; then he went down the gulch the same distance below the mouth of the cavern and placed another pile of pine knots. When this had been done the next serious question was to fire them.

As both piles must be fired at the same time he, of course, would require some help, for he could not be in two places at once. So old Joe went back to the cavern.

"Don't shoot, boys, it's me," he said, as he heard the ominous click of rifles.

"Why did you not light the bonfires, Joe," Bob whispered.

"Waal, boy, both got ter be lighted at ther same time, an' ez I can't be in two places to onct, I came back fur a leetle help."

"What do you want?"

"I want some un ter go up ther gulch while I go down it, an' set fire to ther pile o' pine knots thar."

"I'll go," said Bob.

"No, you won't," growled Phil. "Here you've been takin' every danger and bravin' every risk since we have been here, and this time I will insist on having a hand in it myself."

"Oh, Bob, do let him go, and you stay with me," Rose Thorne whispered, clinging to the arm of the youth.

"Stay, Bob, jist ter keep down a condemned leetle diffikilty in ther family, an' spilin' a hull evenin's fun, let Phil come along hisself, won't yer?"

"Yes, Bob, do," gasped Rose, clinging frantically to Bob's arm.

Bob, finding that it would be impossible to resist such pleading, said:

"Well, if you insist so strongly, I will not object; but I don't want you to think that I am afraid to take the risk."

"Oh, good land o' Goshen! boy, no un'll ever accuse you o' cowardice. Everybody what knows you at all knows ye love danger better'n a houn' pup loves meat. But, Phil, ar ye ready?"

"Yes."

"Come on then, for them pesky, sneakin' red varmints are beginnin' ter wag their tongues, an' I wouldn't be s'prised 'f they hain't in moshun putty soon."

"I am ready."

Phil leaped over the stone parapet and received his final instructions from old Joe.

"Git thar jist ez soon ez ye kin and strike yer match an' set the fine dry brush an' grass on fire wot's on this side o' their pile. Ye've got ter git the minit ye do it, Phil, or ye'll hev a dozen bullets an' arrers stickin' right inter ye. Them red varmints 'll know what it means."

Phil Sheldon trembled just the least bit, and his thoughts went back over his past life, and tried to make a serious dip into the future, but without avail.

Slowly and carefully, on bended knees, without noise and with all the motions of a creeping cat, glided Phil Sheldon toward the heap of brushwood. Ever and anon he paused to listen. His heart beat and his labored breathing told of his intense excitement.

He was near enough to hear the low murmur of voices, by which he knew the Indians and white renegades were massing their forces behind their moving works. Perhaps they had already rolled the great bundle past the bonfire.

But Phil continued crawling farther and farther toward it; nearer and nearer he pressed, until he was at the side of the bonfire. The voices of the enemy could be heard not more than a dozen paces away; and as Phil struck his match and

ignited the dry grass and fine bushes, he held his breath. Holding his hat over the flame, he watched it until it had ignited, and then by a quick turn threw himself out of the line of the light.

Not a moment too soon, for a yell of rage went up from the Indians, and half a dozen shots whizzed through the feeble flame.

For a moment Phil paused behind a great jutting stone, and as he saw a body of dark forms rush to extinguish the flames, he drove them back by well directed shots.

Bob had in the meanwhile commenced on them with his rifle, and the Indians hardly dared show their heads more than by daylight.

In the meanwhile old Silver Joe had ignited his bonfire and escaped.

Both reached their works and sprang inside, just as the flames above and below illuminated the whole gulch as light as day.

"Cousarn the infarnil varmints!" growled the old man, as he watched the flames leaping and crackling around the pine logs. "reckin they think they kin beat me at sarcumwentin. Ah, they got fooled on it that time. Whoop, hurrah, ye onery cusses! how'd d'ye like that?" he yelled.

Four distant shots came humming over the flames, and fell rattling among the rocks.

"Get fly, ye onery red niggers an' white trash, wot's wus. Ef yer think ye kin take in Silver Joe, yer left, that's all thar is on it."

An Indian occasionally raised a head above the logs, but a shot always sent it below.

Those on the upper part of the gulch tried the extraordinary scheme of rolling their dry pine log breastwork over the fire.

The plan would have succeeded admirably had their rolling breastwork not been of material dry as tinder and ignited like powder. In a moment it was all in flames.

Wild yells made the night hideous.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Silver Joe, as he witnessed the mishap. "Them fools hez done it now fur sartin."

Above, below, and all around, the besieging party made the night hideous with their yells. Occasionally an Indian became too conspicuous, and drew the fire of the white men.

One or two of the renegades who had been behind the rolling breastwork were shrewd enough to beat a retreat as soon as they discovered that the thing was on fire.

They moved slowly and carefully out of range of those deadly rifles before the flames were sufficiently high to reveal them to the marksmen.

The Indians followed their example, and their plan had to be abandoned.

"It's all right now," said Bob. "They will give it up until some new device can be agreed upon."

"Injun cunnin' never war equal to a white man's, nohow," said old Joe.

"The face is there again," said Rose.

"What, Rose?"

"The ghost face is lowering a curious ladder from the top."

The girl's face was deathly white, and she looked as if she was a ghost, instead of seeing one.

For a moment old Silver Joe was silent, and then, with a very serious expression on his face, he said:

"Yer needn't be afeard, boys. It ar' a ghost—it ar' Eph's ghost come back to help us out, and it won't do us any harm. 'Tain't nateral, boys—'tain't nateral, but it's safe. Dead ur alive Eph's our friend."

Despite all his skepticism in regard to ghosts, Bob Maxwell could not but feel some strange sensations such as he had always been a stranger to.

What was it?

Was he superstitious? Did he really believe in ghosts, or

was this feeling brought on by a close sympathy with old Silver Joe?

"Bob, yer must go fust," said Joe.

At first Bob was about to insist that someone else should go first; but on reflection decided that he would brave the danger.

It should not be said that he who had been first to lead in ordinary danger would shrink at this.

"Phil, keep a good lookout until I am above," he whispered.

When he and Joe and the fair girl reached the great chamber they found the ladder extending from that dizzy height down to the bottom of the cavern.

The wounded man and chest were brought in ready to be hoisted. Then Bob started up the ladder, his heart beating strangely.

A pale, white face, surmounted by a pale blue, ghastly halo, looked down at him.

"Eph, Eph! Oh, Eph! Have you come to save me?" cried Silver Joe.

"Yes," answered a strange, sepulchral voice, seeming to come from the tomb.

CHAPTER XVII.

EPH AND JOE.

Bob Maxwell felt a strange thrill possess him as that awful sepulchral voice, seeming to come from the tomb, rang out in the vast subterranean chamber. His hands trembled, and he came near falling. Bob was not the least superstitious, but that voice, the pale, ghost-like face and assurance that the speaker was from the land of the dead, seemed to overcome all his skepticism.

"This is awful!" he thought, as he approached nearer and nearer to the opening. Higher and higher he climbed. The lofty vault to which he was ascending seemed to recede as he ascended toward it.

Further and further he climbed, the frail ladder swaying this way and that. He wanted to look up, and yet he dared not, for he felt sure that there was something there terrible which he would not want to see.

The opening was at last reached, and a voice in a ghost-like whisper, said:

"Keep a firm hold and steady head."

Excellent advice certainly for a ghost to give, and he obeyed it to the letter.

A pair of hands seized his shoulders and helped draw him through.

Strong, flesh-like hands, instead of the bony, skeleton fingers he had expected to find, and Bob, half dead with a vague, unknown dread, lay panting upon the ground.

"Why what's the matter with you, youngster? You look as if you were scared half to death," said the voice of a man, which was anything but ghostly. "I would think you, who have made so many gallant fights, wouldn't faint now."

Bob, heartily ashamed of himself for his fear, gave the man a good look. He was no ghost, though the strange lamp he carried, emitting a pale blue flame, was something rather ghastly in its appearance, and gave a strange death-like pallor to his face.

"It's all gone now," said Bob. "I was weak and faint. The climb was terrible. Are any of the Indians near?"

"No. All are in the gulch."

"We must get them out soon. There is a wounded man, a girl and a chest to be drawn up with ropes. Have you an extra supply?"

"Yes."

Their friend, whoever he was, had prepared himself with an abundance of ropes, and they were soon gotten in readiness.

"We have no time to spare," said Bob.

"The Indians are going to make an assault on the cave as soon as those lights burn out of the gulch."

"Yes—they would have done so long ago had not the nights been too light," his strange mountain friend answered. "But fortunately for you, the moon has shone almost bright as day, ever since you have been cooped up in that cave until tonight."

"You don't talk like a ghost," said Bob.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't explain now, but the idea got among some of us that you were a dead man."

"My blue light gives my face a strange pallor. I use it because the Indians cannot see it so far."

"I understand. Let us get the ropes down."

Ropes were arranged and lowered, and the wounded man rolled up in the bearskin tightly tied and ready to hoist.

"Fur heaven sake, lift keerful, boys, or he'll fall," said Silver Joe.

The men above appreciated the warning.

They knew that if a rope slipped or the wounded man turned in the least, he would get a fearful plunge down, down to certain death in the rocky vault below.

Rose Thorne stood with a face that was deathly pale watching the bundle which contained her father as it ascended upward. Her anxiety was no greater than was expressed by old Silver Joe. The old scout stood, a painful expression on his kind old face, as he watched the wounded man on his aerial flight.

"Oh, gal, it air awful," he said, with a choking sigh. "That ar rope mought slip an' he fall, but then thar's more 'n mortal power at the top. I never believed in ghosts afore, but I do now. That air man is Eph, and Eph is dead. He's been dead five yeers, an' came back from anuther world ter help his brother out uv a bad fix."

The girl shuddered and whispered:

"No, no, Joe. It can't be your brother."

"Oh, gal, it is. Heaven never made two faces so much alike. It's Eph, an' thar ain't one bit o' doubt o' it. I know Eph, and it's him."

They watched the swaying object as it ascended.

Slowly and painfully swaying to this side and that, the wounded man approached the opening.

Now it goes smoothly upward, but anon there is a slight jerk.

"Heaven! the rope has slipped!" gasped Silver Joe, his face expressive of the deepest solicitude, if not agony.

Rose Thorne gave utterance to a smothered scream, as she expected each moment to see her father dashed to pieces on the rocks at her feet.

But the rope caught again and the wounded man began once more to ascend.

They could hear the piteous groans and knew what a terrible mental ordeal he had gone through.

"Hurry up, quick, in there!" Phil could be heard crying from the front entrance of the cavern. "The bonfires are about burnt out and the Indians are massing on the front for an assault."

It was one of the most trying ordeals that even Silver Joe had been exposed to.

"Keep 'em back, boy, for heaven sake, keep 'em back, 'till we get out safe. Here's ther gal an' chist."

"I'll do the best I can."

"Crack, crack, crack!" went the repeating rifle of the young miner, and the Indians were again checked.

"Hold 'em thar lad, hold 'em thar fur a leetle while an' we'll hev everything ready," cried the old man. At this moment

the wounded miner was lifted through the skylight-like opening above, and two ropes were lowered for the chest.

"Hurry up—up thar, we're in a condemned leetle diffikilty down here," cried the old man.

"Heave away!" said the deep-toned voice of their strange friend and rescuer, as soon as the ropes were fastened about the chest.

It was certainly anything but a ghost-like command, but Old Silver Joe, casting a glance toward it, said in a deep, sepulchral whisper:

"It's Eph's voice, gal, sure ez we ar' here; it's Eph an' he's been dead nigh onto five y'ars now."

The girl shuddered but was unable to make any answer. Somehow the strange words of the old man choked her with dread.

The great chest was hauled up through the opening without any delay, and then Bob, looking down as the rope was lowered, said:

"Joe, tie the rope about the body of Rose carefully. Don't let there be any chance for a slip. As soon as she is up you and Phil can follow."

He made the rope secure about her waist, and by some deft turns of the ends of the rope, with the skill of a sailor he formed a swing for her to sit in, and told her he was ready. The signal was given for Bob to hoist her aloft, and in a moment Rose was swinging in the air.

"Joe, Joe, quick!" cried Phil from the front entrance.

Crack, crack!

A roar of firearms answered the two shots fired by Phil.

A thunder clap seemed to shake the cavern to its very center.

There was a volley of rifle shots, and Phil's voice was drowned by the roar.

"Great guns, Ginerel Scott an' Tom Walker!" roared the old scout, leaping to the front with his repeating rifle.

A volume of smoke was rolling into the mouth of the cavern which hid objects, and for a few moments he was unable to see Phil.

But anon he discovered him starting up from the ground where he had fallen.

Other dark objects could be seen through the dense smoke, and at these the old miner began blazing away as rapidly as he could pull lever and trigger of his gun.

The old miner discovered that the roar he had heard had been an explosion under their breastwork, which had been almost blown down by a charge of powder.

"Are you hurt, Phil?" he asked, as Phil got upon his feet and picked up his gun.

"No—I was knocked down by the explosion, that was all. They crept up under the rocks and planted a fuse which tore down our breastworks."

"But I driv 'em back; come now ter ther inside work."

There was not a moment to be lost, for the howling, shrieking redskins having forced their way to the front of the cavern, were yelling and screeching like demons and pressing forward over the rocks.

Rifles and pistols blazed, and their bullets and arrows whizzed through the cavern.

"Back—back, boy, ter ther inside o' ther cave," cried the old man, dragging Phil, who was still somewhat stunned by the explosion so near him.

He got upon his feet, however, shook his head, and with his rifle retreated through the narrow opening which they had fortified.

Wait here a minit, Phil."

"Why?"

"We'll gin 'em thunder right here."

"All right."

Phil was brave as a lion, despite the fact that he was inclined a little to grumble.

The Indians, finding no resistance at the first works, poured in over them, when a withering fire was poured in on them from the pair of repeating Winchesters behind the rocks in the narrow opening.

For a moment they tried to stem the current, but it was too strong, and with yells of dismay they leaped through the outlet into the gulch again and fled for life.

Old Joe knew that they would return again, for they had now come to the conclusion that they had but two to contend with, believing that the third had been killed.

"Come, Phil, yer got ter git out o' this," he said, leading the youthful miner to the ladder.

"Hurry up and then I'll come."

Phil ascended the ladder as rapidly as he dared, for the frail thing swayed and trembled the higher he got, and it was with no little anxiety that he climbed to the top.

At last he was pulled through, and then old Joe, who had been on guard, slung his rifle over his shoulder, put out the last light, and climbed up the rope ladder with the agility of a sailor.

He reached the opening, and was drawn through, and the ladder pulled up, cutting off pursuit.

One glance at the strange rescuer, and Silver Joe cried:

"Oh, Eph, Eph, Eph!"

"Joe!"

And the old miner clasped his brother in the flesh—it was no ghost who had saved them after all.

CHAPTER XVIII.

EPH'S STORY—A SURPRISE.

"Bob," Rose whispered. "He is no ghost."

"No."

"Who is he?"

"The brother of Silver Joe."

"Eph?"

"Yes."

"But he was killed."

"Joe thought so, but I guess he was not. Joe was deceived, and is no doubt agreeably surprised to find his brother alive."

But the old man was now speaking himself, and they listened.

"Eph, Eph," he gasped. "Oh, is it you, ur am I dreamin'?"

"It is me, Joe. It is your brother, Ephraim Thorne."

"Thorne!" gasped Rose.

"Thorne!"

"Thorne!" cried both Bob and Phil.

"Hush, Eph, hush, don't let it all come too sudden-like on them. Tell me first, is it really you, or is it a ghost?"

"It is me—I am no ghost."

"But warn't you killed?"

"No."

Eph laughed at the idea, and continued:

"I made them think I was killed. The body of one of my pursuers was thought to be me, and I guess they got the reward on it which had been offered for me. In fact, I know it. But Moonshine Mose knew I was not killed."

"That was what the onery rascal meant when he said he had no hand in it. I war a-goin' to kill him for doin' it."

"Did you say you were Ephraim Thorne?" asked Bob, who was amazed.

"Yes—but——"

"We ain't got no time to explain here," said Silver Joe. "Pack up, boys, and let's be goin'."

"What will you do with it?" gasped the wounded man, rising on his elbow and pointing to the great wooden chest.

"We can't take it with us," said Phil. "It's too large and heavy."

"We must not leave it behind to fall into their hands," gasped the wounded man.

"Do you know where we kin hide it, Eph?" asked Silver Joe.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"There is a hole in the rocks up here aways where we can hide the chest, and I'll bet the redskins never find it, either."

"That's it then, brother. Now two on us must carry him an' the t'other two the chest."

Bob and Phil lifted the rude litter on which lay the wounded man, who had become so greatly emaciated that he was a light weight to carry.

Joe and his brother carried the chest, and, bringing it to the place where Eph had said it could be hidden securely, they chucked it into a hole in the rocks and rolled a great slab of stone over the place, which completely shut it out from view.

"Mark the place—mark the spot where it can be found," the wounded man whispered from his litter, where he lay helpless as a child.

"We will all know it," said Bob.

"Mark it well, Rose, for it is to your interest to know the place," he feebly whispered.

"I have, father," she answered.

"We will all know the spot," said Bob.

"When I am dead—come and get it—open the box and—and—— Well, you will know it all then. It will make no difference then, but not now—I can't bear a reproachful glance from her."

"We must go on," said Eph.

The wounded man was lifted from the ground, and with Ephraim for guide, the little party moved away through the woods and rocks on the mountain-side. It was not a very rapid march, for they found the way rough and difficult.

The night wore away, and no sign of their pursuers was to be seen.

All began to hope that the Boys of the Mountain had left the Indians holed up in the great cavern.

It was known that they would have to make a circuit of several miles before they could climb to the top of the bluff, and they hoped to be beyond their reach ere they gained it.

All night long the little party of hunted men traveled wearily along the tortuous path.

Rose Thorne stood the journey nobly, making no complaint, although she had become very weary and her feet were bruised and sore.

At dawn of day they halted in a narrow valley, and Eph shot a small deer with his bow and arrow. He was as proficient with the bow and arrow as any Indian among the mountains.

The skin was removed, a small fire built, and they proceeded to broil the venison steak in the blaze.

"Now, Eph, while we chaw our meat, let's hev your story. We want to know how 'tis ye ain't dead, jist ez everybody supposed ye would be."

"Well, I can tell you the whole story, Joe, in a short time," said Eph, as he masticated his food in a way which made it self-evident that he was not defunct. "I don't know whether these folks have heard the first part of the story or not."

"They hev," interrupted Joe. "I hev told 'em all, Eph, up to the time ye war killed in the mountings. Now ye begin with that event, and go ahead."

"I wasn't killed."

"Waal, I left yer that away in my tale, which I ended like

they do in story papers at an interestin' pint ter be continered in our next."

"All right," Eph answered, with a smile. "I will begin, then, at the point where I was killed, or supposed to be killed."

"I know that, although I had committed no crime I could get no justice from the vigilantes. They were my enemies, and, having offered a reward of two hundred ounces o' dust for me, dead or alive, they would not stop night or day until I was taken. One night while I was lying in a cavern on the mountain side like a hunted fox, I conceived a plan, which, terrible as it was, promised success. I was to die."

"There was no escape for me, save in the oblivion of death, and I determined to seek what would seem to be that. That morning I discovered one of my pursuers on the mountain alone. He was about my size, my age, complexion, and resembled me much more than my brother."

"Well, the upshot of it was I shot him down, and in a few moments after dragged him into the thorny oak thicket and changed suits with him. Then, dragging the dead body with me, I went out on the mountain-side and came in full view of Moonshine Mose and his party. They did not see the body—only me—and fired. I ran behind some bushes, screamed as if I was mortally hurt, and threw the body of my slain pursuer over the cliff. He fell and was, of course, mangled beyond recognition. In after years, however, I had good reason to believe that Moonshine Mose understood the deception."

"Well, I hid among the mountains a long time, hoping to meet my brother, but failing, and knowing I could not hide there much longer without being discovered, I started down the Sierra Nevadas, intending to enter Old Mexico and write to my brother."

"One day, as I was journeying along a mountain path, I heard a whiz past my ear, and the next instant saw an arrow strike the ground about two rods before me."

"I started up, for I knew it was an Apache. A moment later I was surrounded on every side by hostile Indians."

"By leveling my gun first at one and then at another they fell back one at a time, and thus matters stood for some time, until some of the rascals got behind me, and, springing on my shoulders, threw me down, and I was a prisoner."

"I expected to be scalped, but instead I was adopted into the tribe, and, knowing that I would not be safe among the white people, become a full-fledged Indian."

"Well, years went by——"

"Crack!" went a rifle, the bullet whizzing through the brim of Eph's hat.

"Surprised!" cried Bob.

"Down, down—tree, or yer a dead nigger!" cried Silver Joe.

In a moment all had sprung to cover, and not a moment too soon, either, for a volley of rifle shots whizzed about the camp, knocking the fire in every direction.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CONFESSION.

"Look out, thar, consarn me ef we ain't ergoin' ter be per-cipitated into a condemned leetle diffikilty afore we knows it," roared old Silver Joe, as from behind a stone he poured out shot after shot on the redskins.

"Come on—come on—they're all down," the voice of Moonshine Mose could be heard yelling, as he urged his renegades and savages to rush on the miners and exterminate them."

At the sound of his voice every redskin grew hopeful, and, bounding from their hiding-places, they rushed like so many tigers upon the miners, who from behind their hiding-places poured streams of lurid death among them.

Down went redskins and bandits together, and among them fell the leader, Moonshine Mose himself, by a well-directed shot from Eph's rifle, and by his side fell Big Deer.

Hearing no longer the sound of their chief's voice, the Indians soon became discouraged and fled.

The renegades followed them.

A mile or two away, they came upon a party of honest miners, who, apprised of the fact that a band of Apaches and renegades were in the mountains, had turned out to hunt them.

The fight that ensued was soon over. The Indians were put to flight and the mountain outlaws captured to a man. It is needless, perhaps, to say that Judge Lynch was quick in his work with them. They were all hanged.

But to return to the main characters of our story.

Scarce had the redskins broken away and fled, before there rose a shriek on the air, and Rose threw herself on the body of her father.

"What is the matter, Rose?—what has happened?" Bob asked.

"Oh, he is killed—he is dead."

She was correct.

A stray bullet had put an end to the career of the mysterious man, who had died with his secret locked in his bosom.

"Eph, Eph," sobbed old Joe, "it's our—our brother Sol."

"What?" gasped Eph.

"Don't ye know him?"

Ephraim Thorne had not given the wounded man a careful look before, but now that he did so he recognized in him his long lost brother.

With a bitter wail of grief he threw himself down upon his knees by the side of the dead man.

"Bob, when is all this mystery going to end?" Phil asked.

"I don't know, Phil. Let us see if the enemy are gone to a certainty."

They went down upon a cliff and saw them all in flight below the table land.

Moonshine Mose was found among the slain.

On their return Bob said to Joe:

"Why didn't you tell us before that the wounded man was your brother?"

"I swore I would never speak my own name till Eph's murderers were killed, for I thought Eph war dead then. When I found out the wounded fellow was my brother I said nothin' to no one."

"Did he recognize you?"

"No, I reckon not. I've changed some, changed in features and in speech. Once I talked as nice as anybody, but long associations on the frontier and in order to more completely disguise myself I fell into the hunters' slang, and keep it up to this day."

"What is the mystery about Rose?"

"Honest, boy, I dun know."

"Is she your brother's child?"

"No; brother never had a child."

"Then it is too bad; the only person who could have unlocked the mystery is dead, and it will never be known."

"Yes, it might."

"What do you mean, Joe?"

"Waal, ye remember that box in the old chest? It mought have some b'arin' on the subject."

"It may; it may. And he said we could examine the box after he was dead. It may be it will reveal the mystery."

Bob was all anxiety now to see the box and delve into the mystery. Might it not be, after all, that the parents of Rose were alive?

Going to the girl, he said:

"Rose, the end has come, and you are without a protector."

"Oh, Bob, what shall I do?" the fair creature sobbed. "Papa

—poor papa is dead, and there is no one now to care for me! Oh, what—say what shall I do?"

"Rose, will you intrust yourself to me?"

"Yes."

"We are young yet, but circumstances might justify an early marriage; will you be my wife?"

"Oh, Bob, I had never thought of that, but—but I do like you, and will marry you at any time," she said, with child-like simplicity.

"Now, Rose, I am going to tell you what you might have surmised before."

"What?"

"Solomon Thorne was not your father! Your name is not Thorne."

"Then—then who am I?" she asked.

"We do not know, Rose, nor does it make any difference to me. I have determined to make you my wife whether you be the child of a prince or a pauper. But we are going now to take the box from the big chest and delve into the mystery of your early life. Do you care to go along?"

"Yes, yes—and yet I tremble so at the thought. I remember now that he said that box was more to me than all the gold of Arizona. What could he have meant by it?"

"He doubtless alluded to the box as containing the mystery of your birth."

"Who am I? Oh, who am I?" the fair, brave girl asked.

"We shall soon know."

The dead man was laid out and Silver Joe and Phil left to guard his body, and Bob and Eph went with Rose to the spot where they had left the wooden chest concealed.

It was drawn out of its hiding-place, and Eph, who had taken the key from his dead brother's pocket, unlocked the chest and opened it.

"There is the box," said Bob.

"You take it out," said Eph.

Bob's hands trembled despite his efforts to overcome his anxiety, and he could scarce lift the box from its hiding-place; but he did so.

Placing it on the ground, he looked for some means of opening it, but none could be seen.

The box was round and, as we have said before, curiously inlaid and carved.

At last he discovered that the lid was screwed on, and, seizing the top, he began twisting it. It moved, and in a few moments he had it off.

"You have seen it before, have you not?" Bob asked Rose.

"No. I only caught a glimpse of it the other day when you did."

He removed the lid and revealed some folded papers lying in the bottom.

"Take it out and read it," said Eph Thorne, seeing that Bob hesitated to touch what might be the revelation of a great family secret.

Bob glanced at Rose and she said:

"Read it, Bob. I would rather you'd do it than have anybody else in the world."

Bob took out the paper and unfolded it.

With many interruptions and exclamations from Eph and Rose, he read the following:

A CONFESSION.

"It is my intention in writing out this full and free confession to right after death some of the wrongs done during my life. I am the second of three sons. The oldest was Joseph, who spent most of his life on the frontier; the second, Solomon, myself, and the third, Ephraim, my younger brother, whom I learned was killed by the Indians.

"I must confess at the outset of this statement, which I intend shall never be re- until I am dead, that I was always

a selfish boy and rather retiring. I was willful as a child, and on my near approach to manhood I grew morose and sullen. I can see my faults now. I could see them then, but made no efforts to mend them. In school I was brilliant and my parents were proud of me. I grew ambitious as well as selfish, and on graduating from college, as I did with honors, I bade fair to make my mark in the world. My parents were delighted with me. I went into business and made a success of everything. What my hand touched turned to gold. I was a millionaire at thirty, and went to Europe, determined to marry a lady of nobility. Here I learned I was nobody. I managed through my wealth to get an introduction into society and formed the acquaintance of a young countess, Arabella La Fontaine. She was just twenty, of the finest old French and English families; and never was an angel more beautiful. For the first time in my life I loved. I loved as madly as I had been indifferent before. But while I was treated respectfully, I was assured from the very first that my love was not returned.

"Later on I learned that she was beloved by a wealthy Austrian count, and they were betrothed. As the betrothal had been sanctioned by the crowns of the two nations, and as Count Rudolph Zubert and Countess Arabella La Fontaine loved each other madly, I, of course, had no show. I swore I would wed Arabella, but she became the wife of the count, and I was baffled for the first time in my life. To one who had followed his own sweet will all his life, and never failed before, this was a terrible humiliation for me.

"I could do but one thing, and that was swear to be avenged. Mine was not blind fury, but a malicious, deceitful cunning. It took countless thousands and almost two years to accomplish what I desired. It was no more, no less than stealing the first-born of the count and countess.

"How did I succeed? As I said, it was by the expenditure of hundreds of thousands of dollars, and worse still, a humiliation. I bought over the nurse of the little countess and married her secretly. Then one dark night when Rosalind was only eight months old, we stole her away, went aboard a yacht I had in waiting, and sailed for South America, where we remained three years. Then we came to the United States, where I went to my former home in Ohio.

"The newspapers had made a great noise about the stolen child, and rewards that were fabulous had been offered for it. Its mother had lost her mind and was an inmate of an insane asylum. But neither their wealth, nor the touching stories told of the grief of the parents melted my heart. I lived for vengeance. I had married the servant and squandered thousands for vengeance.

But with the stolen countess came ill luck. I failed in every scheme and undertaking. I lived in constant dread of detectives searching for the lost heir. My wife died, but as I had never loved her, it only relieved me of a care. I grew to love little Rose Thorne, as I called the child. She is very bright, very beautiful and affectionate.

"Her sad eyes have often reproved me, and, believing me to be her father, she has always been one of the most dutiful children the world has ever known. I have determined that my vengeance shall not extend beyond my life, and I write this confession so that after my death Rosalind may be righted of her great wrongs. She is the lawful heir of the Count Rudolph of Austria.

"Three years before this writing I rescued a man from a wreck, and he gave me the map and plot of Claim 33 with a deed to the claim. As I was then very poor, and as I knew that out in the wilds of Arizona I would be less likely to be found by detectives than if I should remain in the states, I came and brought Rose with me. For proofs to the above I have only to refer to the count above referred to and his father-in-law, Count La Fontaine of Hidelberg. In the box

with this confession will be found the diamond necklace which Rosalind wore when she was abducted, also her garments and jewels, all of which may be of use in establishing her identity.

"The above I declare to be a true, full, free and complete statement, given without either the hope of reward or fears of punishment.

"Claim 33, August 16th, 18—.

"SOLOMON THORNE."

CHAPTER XX.

CONCLUSION.

No sooner had Bob finished reading that most wonderful confession than the paper dropped from his hand, and he staggered, and had he not leaned against a tree he would have fallen.

Rose, as we shall continue to call her, came to his side and said:

"Bob, Bob, what does it all mean?"

"It's true."

"Bob, am I asleep?"

"No, no, I wish I was. But I know it, I have felt it coming for some time. It is all too true. You are a countess, and I—I—I—a beggar."

"Bob, don't say that," cried the girl. "Think of the countless millions of dollars in gold that lies here for you."

"What is gold but dross? It is dirt. I care nothing for it. Oh, Rosalind, I have lost you!"

Bob could say no more. Eph Thorne, quite affected by the singular scene, turned about and walked away. His brother's willfulness had caused all this woe, and he cared not to be a witness of more misery.

"Bob! Bob! what do you mean?" Rose asked.

"I mean, Rose, that you cannot be mine. We can no longer think of marriage——"

"Why?"

"You are a countess."

"And you are one of nature's noblemen."

"But nature's noblemen count but very little against the power of European nobility."

"Bob, I'll tell you what we can do," said the girl, a happy thought illuminating her face.

"What?"

"Burn those papers—burn the confessions, and they will never know who I am, nor come to look after me."

"It's useless, Countess Rosalind. I will not consent to cheat you. I must give you up."

"Never! Never! What is title, wealth and parents——"

The brave girl could say no more, but broke down and sobbed bitterly.

He told her they would submit the matter to their friends, and for the present it would be as well to forget that she was a countess.

Solomon Thorne was buried in the mountains near where he had fallen, and a plain stone slab reared to mark his last resting-place. His great crime, for the sake of his plain, simple, honest brothers, was never known.

Silver Joe and Eph assisted the boys in removing the gold to the mint, where, on a fair distribution, it was ascertained that, after giving the girl her half, there was left to each of them more than a million dollars in bullion.

Then came up the question of what was to be done with Claim 33.

After considerable discussion it was decided to sell it out to a wealthy mining company, each taking several thousands of dollars of the stock. The deal was made to a great ad-

vantage to them all, and the mine has paid handsome dividends ever since.

The reader will observe that Silver Joe had greatly improved in his speech. Joe Thorne was a fairly educated man. But with all his rudeness his advice was good.

"Bob," said Rosalind, "are you going to take it?"

"Yes."

"Then I hope they will deny me."

Bob was wicked enough to wish so himself, but he had not said so. His heart gave a great bound at the thought, but immediately his hopes sank, for surely no one could doubt that noble blood flowed in the veins of that nobly grand person.

"No, no, Rose,"—she made him still call her Rose. "There is no parent on earth who would reject you."

"Bob, if a crown was offered me to reject you I would not accept it," said the girl, her face flushing proudly. "What need I care for wealth or title? We have all the wealth we need, and I love the wild mountains of America more than the regal pomp of Europe."

But Bob's sense of honor still compelled him to write to Count Rudolph, which he did, notifying him of all. In a few months he received a letter from the count, expressing an eager desire to read the confession and see the young lady, also necklace, jewels and dress.

Bob felt that he was going to lose a treasure more dear to him than all the gold he had mined in Claim 33.

Phil, Silver Joe and Eph accompanied them to Europe. They learned that the Countess Arabella had regained her reason, and when Bob saw her and noted the wonderful resemblance between her and Rose, he never doubted the story written by Solomon Thorne.

Count Rudolph and his wife required but little proof to convince them that this was their daughter. Their hearts intuitively told them it was from the first, and the confession, the necklace, jewels and infantile clothing proved it beyond a doubt.

"I knew it," Bob sighed, when the matter had been all arranged and the new heiress had been duly installed in her title and home. "I knew I would have to give her up."

When Count Rudolph learned that the wealthy young American miner had won the heart of their daughter when she was unknown and friendless, they readily consented to their nuptials.

We have little more to tell. Silver Joe, his brother Eph, and Phil are all wealthy miners in Arizona.

A few days ago a tall, stately gentleman was seen at the board of exchange in New York, and attracted much attention among the business men.

"Who is he?" someone asked.

A bystander answered:

"He is the son-in-law of an Austrian count; his name is Bob Maxwell, and he is president of the best paying mine in the world, Claim 33."

THE END.

Read "THE ROAD TO RUIN; OR, THE SNARES AND TEMPTATIONS OF NEW YORK," by Jno. B. Dowd, which will be the next number (276) of "Pluck and Luck."

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